BETTY GRIER

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BY

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'Robbie Doo,' 'Cracks wi' Robbie Doo,' &c.

WITH FRONTISPIECE BY

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CHAPTER I.

WHEN I look round my little bedroom and note the various familiar items that make up its furnishings, when my eye lights on much that I associate with the days o' Auld Langsyne, I am conscious of a feeling of homeliness, a sense of chumship with my surroundings, and I can scarcely realise that fourteen years have come and gone since last I laid my head on the pillow of this small truckle-bed.

So far as I can recall the arrangement of its old-fashioned, ordinary-looking plenishings, everything remains exactly as I left it. My trout and salmon rods, all tied together—each cased in its own particular-coloured canvas—stand there in the corner beside an old out-of-date gaff and a capacious landing-net which that king of fishers, Clogger Eskdale, gifted to me when the 'rheumatics' prevented his ever

again participating in his favourite sport. My worn leather school-bag, filled with the last batch of books I used, is still suspended from a four-inch nail driven into a 'dook' at the cheek of the mantelpiece. It is a long time ago, but it seems only yesterday since I stood in the middle of this room, unstrapping that bag from my shoulders for the last time. My schooldays were over; with eager, anxious feet I was standing on the threshold of a new life, and to satchel and lesson-book I was bidding farewell.

I well remember Deacon Webster, at my mother's request, inserting that dook and driving home that nail; and he laughed unfeelingly when she explained to him the purpose it was to serve. The deacon could not understand the sentiment which prompted her to assign the bag a place upon the wall; and when, after the nail was secure, he made to hang my 'boy's burden' upon it in much the same callous spirit in which he would screw the last nail in a coffin-lid, my mother stepped forward.

'One moment, Webster,' she said. 'Allow me.' With her own hands she placed the bag where it hangs now. My old nurse, Betty Grier, straightened it and wiped it with her duster; and the deacon took a pinch of snuff,

blew his nose in a big spotted handkerchief, and muttered *sotto voce*, as his nostrils quivered, 'Well, I'm d——!'

Against the back wall, in the centre, between the door and the corner, stands the old black oak chest of drawers which for sixteen years held the whole outfit of my boyhood's days; while the mahogany looking-glass, with the grooved square standards and the swivel mirror, monopolises still, as it always has done, the whole top shelf thereof.

To the left is a framed photograph of my father and mother, and to the right a rosewood-framed sampler, worked long ago by my grandmother, on which, in faded green, against a dull drab background, are still decipherable the words of Our Lord's Prayer. And there, between the fireplace and the window, is my book-rack, and from its shelves old friends look down upon me. The gilt titles are tarnished and worn, but I know each book by the place it occupies, and I feel that, even after the long, long years that have separated us, *Tom Brown*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and *David Copperfield* will speak to me again, laugh with me, cry with me, as they did in days of yore.

Often has Betty, I know, swept and tidied this little room. Every article has been lifted, dusted, and carefully returned to its place. I

know with what feelings of reverence the dear old soul has fingered every ornament. I am conscious of the loving care she has exercised on all my old belongings, and somehow I feel consoled and comforted, my physical weakness depresses me less, my mother's presence seems nearer me, and unbidden tears of thankfulness come to my eyes and trickle from my cheek to my pillow.

This has been to me a day of great events. I have travelled by rail from Edinburgh to Elvanfoot, thence by horse-carriage to Thornhill—during the last stage driven by Charlie Walker, the 'bus Jehu I envied in my schoolboy years, and tended by my fail-me-never Betty. To her also this has been a memorable day, for when we were driving down the Dalveen Pass she told me that never before had she seen a Caledonian train, and that her last memory of Traloss dated back to a Sabbath-school trip about the year 1868. Such a long ride in a well-sprung, well-upholstered carriage was also a novelty to her, a new experience which only with great difficulty I could persuade her to enjoy to the full. She insisted on sitting forward on the extreme edge of the seat, and it was only after I had told her that her uncomfortable-looking position made me uneasy and unhappy that she sat well

back, till her shoulders rested on the cushion behind.

Contrary to my expectations, I am suffering neither pain nor inconvenience from my long journey; and as I lie here in my little bed, looking through the curtained window to the long, low range of the Lowther Hills, and listening to the familiar sounds in the village street below, a blissful peace which I cannot express in words possesses me, my physical and my mental organisation seem to have undergone a change, my experience of city life is blotted out and forgotten, and, strangely enough, I feel myself, as of old, a unit of the village community. Queerer still, this placid acceptance of altered circumstances, this dovetailing into a different condition of life and living, seems to me so natural as to be hardly worth noting; and without a pang of regret I leave behind me urban pleasures and duties, and contemplate with equanimity retirement to this rural retreat, a twelvemonth's sojourn midst scenes to me for ever dear.

Nor does the fact that this rustication is compulsory distress or annoy me. My physical weakness has reduced me to a state of indifference towards former pursuits. A long illness, following a deplorable accident, has impaired my appetite for social joys; so much so, indeed,

that when my doctors—rather apologetically, I thought—informed me that if ever I wished to be well again I must give up my profession and town residence for twelve months at least, and live quietly somewhere in the country, I hailed their verdict with delight, and my yearning heart at once went out to my native village and the home of my old nurse, Betty Grier.

Dear old Betty! To whom else could I turn? She is all—of the human element at least—I have left to me of my home life of long ago. My memories of my father are vague and hazy. I was only five when he died; and, through the misty veil of long-gone years, two pictures only of him are impressed upon my mind. In one I see him standing in the narrow whitewashed pantry, his head 'screeving' the ceiling, and his broad shoulders almost excluding the waning western light that glimmered through the small four-paned window. Betty, white-capped and white-aproned, is there also, with a large ashet in her hands, on which lies a long, thick silver fish—a salmon, as I afterwards learned—one of the many he lured from the depths of Mattha's Pool. My mother's arm is lovingly linked in his, and there is a pleased and happy expression on her face, which somehow is

transmitted to me, because, with her, I feel proud of the great big man I call my daddy, who has battled so successfully with the strong-looking monster now lying so quiet, with gaping mouth, on Betty's ashet.

Then there is a long, dark blank before the next picture appears, and I see him sitting in a big arm-chair at the dining-room fire. His back is cushioned, and a shepherd-tartan plaid is round his shoulders, the ends folded across his knees. My mother is writing letters to his dictation on a small bureau, which has been placed near his chair. I am playing with a Noah's Ark, marshalling the animals in pairs on the rug; and when my mother goes out of the room to the little office adjoining, I leave my toys and stand at his knee, looking up to a face which to me seems very white and pinched. A long, thin hand is placed on my curly head, and with difficulty he bends down and kisses me. I wonder who has been unkind to him, for I see a tear trickling down his cheek, and it falls unheeded on his plaid.

I cannot focus him in my mind's eye in any subsequent event, though I remember perfectly the old doctor with the foxskin cap and the clattering clogs, and the smell of 'Kendal brown' he always left behind. Then a day

came when the window-blinds were pulled down and all the rooms were darkened; when Betty's voice was, even to my childish ears, low and husky; when my mother cuddled me in a tight embrace, and a wet, wet cheek was laid against mine. Oh, how she trembled and sobbed! I felt bewildered and unhappy, and I remember putting my wee, helpless arms round her neck and asking her why she was crying. She told me that daddy had gone away—away to heaven; and when I asked if he wouldn't come back to us again, she said, 'No, no,' and her embrace tightened, and she wept afresh. In a short time the door was hesitatingly opened, and Betty came noiselessly in with a book in her hand which I had often seen her read. She stood behind my mother's chair with her tear-stained face turned away, and her red hand on my mother's shoulder; but she didn't speak. Then she came round, and, 'hunkering' down beside us, opened her book and in a low voice began to read.

I often think it is strange how indelibly imprinted on some childish minds are little incidents of long ago—little glimpses of landscape, snatches of songs, details here and there of passing events. Not that I consider the foregoing a little incident. To me it was at the time of outstanding moment, and even yet

in my retrospect of life it looms large and prominent; but, though I have often endeavoured to recall Betty's ministrations on this occasion, all I can remember is that when she came to the verse, 'I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you,' she spoke the words without referring to her Bible, and she repeated them, the while looking with big, hopeful eyes up to my mother's face. And my mother smiled through her tears; and, stroking Betty's strong brown hair, she called her 'Betty the Comforter.'

A time came in the short after years when she was, by the same dear lips, again called 'Betty the Comforter.' It was when my saintly mother was passing into the spiritland, and, without fear or trepidation, lay calmly awaiting her call. But of this I cannot speak; it is a subject sacred to Betty and to me.

To-night, when I had undressed and was settling myself down for the night, Betty came upstairs, carrying that self-same Bible in her hand. She stood on the threshold for a minute, wiping its covers with the corners of her apron, though well she knew that from frequent use the Book required no dusting.

'Maister Weelum,' she began, 'eh!—I'——

'"William," Betty, please, without the "Mister,"' I said smilingly.

'Yes! yes! so be it—imphm! Eh, this type is clear and big; and I was thinking that maybe ye micht want to read a verse or twae. I'll lay it doon here;' and she reverently placed the precious volume on the top of the chest of drawers.

'Are ye a' richt noo? Ye said ye wanted to speak to me when ye got settled doon. Is there ocht else I can do for ye?'

'I'm feeling fine, Betty,' I said cheerily, 'and not a bit the worse for my long journey, not too tired to have a quiet chat with you. So sit down, please, in the basket chair there, and give me ten minutes of your valuable time.'

'Ten meenits! Certie, hear him noo! Ten meenits, an' the soo 's no suppered yet, an' I 've the morn's broth to prepare, an' wi' me bein' oot o' the hoose a' day there 's a hunner an' ten things starin' me in the face to be dune. But what want ye to speak aboot? I daur say the soo, puir thing, will ha'e to wait, noo that you 're here. Daylight, too, is haudin' lang, an' I 'll sune mak' up the ten meenits. What want ye noo?' And she sat down, with a query in her eye, into the basket chair.

'Well, Betty,' I began, 'you and I have gone over all the old times pretty thoroughly since we met to-day, and we 've taken a peep

into the future as well; but there's one subject we haven't touched upon, and before I go to sleep to-night I wish to come to some understanding with you regarding my board and lodgings.'

'Board an' lodgings?' Betty queried. 'Board an'—— What d'ye mean, Maister Weelum?' and her lip trembled.

'Well, Betty, by board and lodgings I mean the price of my food and the rent of my room here, and whatever sum you'——

'Weelum, stop at once noo; I'll no' ha'e that mentioned;' and she rose excitedly to her feet. 'I'll no' hear o't! The very idea o' speakin' to me—to me, abune a' fouk—o' board an' lodgings! A bonny-like subject that to discuss atween us! Dod, man, yin wad think that ye were a Moniaive mason workin' journeyman in Thornhill. Megstie me! Lovanenty! heard ye ever the like?—imphm! Mair than that, whae's the owner o' this hoose? Whae has refused rent for it a' these years, eh?'

'Betty, Betty,' I feebly protested, 'that's not fair, and you know it. Did you and I not settle that matter long, long ago, and agree that it would never be referred to again?'

Betty had suddenly assumed both the defensive and the aggressive. She had pulled her black-beaded muffettees up over her wrists,

and flung her mutch-strings over her shoulders. I knew of old what these actions meant. She came up to my bedside, and in the fading light I saw a tear coursing down her cheek. 'Maister Weelum,' she said earnestly, 'I 'm safe in sayin' that ye canna look back on a single phase o' your early life in which I didna tak' a pairt. Lang before this world was ony reality to ye, I nursed ye, fed ye, an' dressed ye. In thae early days the greatest pleasure to me on earth was to cuddle an' care for ye. But I needna tell ye o' that, ye ken yoursel'. Ye mind hoo much my presence meant to you; that I 'm sure o'. As for your mother—weel, I never had ony ither mistress. She took me, a young lass, oot o' a most unhappy hame. It was a pleasure—ay, a privilege—to serve her. Weel, on that day that she was ta'en frae you an' me, she said in your hearin' an' mine, "Betty, this has been the only home you ever knew—never leave it. Promise me you 'll accept it.—Willie, my son, you agree?" An' we baith knelt doon at her bedside, an' she went hame happy, kennin' I was provided for. I didna forget that on the nicht o' the funeral day you an' me talked it ower, that I promised to stay here, that it was arranged between us that rent wad never be spoken o', an' that my occupancy wad never be referred to. An',

Maister Weelum, it wadna ha'e been noo, had you yoursel' no' talked to me aboot board an' lodgings. My he'rt will break, that will it, if ye persist'——

For a time we were both silent, both busy with many sacred thoughts and memories. Then Betty, without looking into my face, 'stapped' the sheets round my shoulders and well round my sides. 'There noo,' she said at length, 'you 're weel happit an' comfortable-lookin', an' sairly, I 'm thinkin', in need o' the sleep an' rest which I trust this nicht will be yours. Guid-nicht noo;' and she patted me on the shoulder, as she used to do in the old days when she had put me to bed and was taking my candle away.

'One moment, Betty,' I said promptly. 'Sit down here on the bed beside me, like the good soul you are, and listen to me.—Yes, you may raise my pillow a little. There now, that 's better. Are you listening now?'

She nodded and reseated herself, as I had requested.

'I admit all you say, Betty, about your tenancy of the house, and I am sorry if what I have said has reopened a question which was settled so long ago to our mutual satisfaction. When this rest-cure was prescribed—when I was told that it was absolutely necessary I

should take up my abode in the country—it was to you and to this room that my thoughts were at once directed. I wrote you I was coming—didn't even say by your leave—and planted myself, as it were, down on you, without inquiring whether or not it was agreeable and convenient to you. Now, believe me, Betty, I acted thus without a thought of your free tenancy of this my old home.'

'I ken that fine, Weelum,' she quickly said, and she looked thoughtfully towards me.

'Well, you see, Betty, if you won't allow me to contribute to my living here, you give me reason to assume that you consider you are in your own way working off an obligation; else why should I live on your—forgive the word, Betty—on your charity?'

'But then, Maister Weelum, you forget that I 'm sittin' here rent free.'

'Now, Betty, there you go again. Was not that my mother's request?'

'Yes.'

'Well, she imposed no obligation on you?'

'No.'

'Then, Betty, none exists between us; and, in that case, if I remain here I must be allowed to contribute to the family expenses. Besides, Betty, it is not as if I were a poor man. Thank goodness! I can well afford it; for,

between you and me and that bedpost against which you are leaning, I've made over a thousand pounds a year for these last four years.'

'Lovanenty, Weelum, a—a thoosan' pounds!' and she held up her hands in astonishment. 'Bless my life, is that possible? I hope ye made it honestly, my boy?'

'I certainly did,' I said glibly. 'I assure you, Betty, I made it honestly.'

'Imphm, an' you a lawyer!' said she dryly. She smiled, and after some reflection began to laugh heartily.

'Oh, come now, Betty, don't round on an old friend like that.' But Betty heard me not, for she was holding her sides and hotching with convulsive laughter.

'Oh, Weelum! oh, my boy!' she said, between her kinks, 'it's no' you—it's no' you I'm lauchin' at. It's something that happened at the weekly prayer-meetin' in Mrs Shankland's last Wednesday nicht. D'ye mind o' Dauvid Tamson the draper?'

I nodded in the affirmative.

'Weel, as ye dootless ken, Dauvid has been a' his days a conceited, fussy, arguin' man, aye desperate honest and well-meanin', but terr'ble unreasonable and heidstrong, and he's never dune takin' to the law or consultin' his agent,

as he ca's it. Weel, he was at the prayer-meetin' last Wednesday nicht, and, as it happened, it was his turn to officiate. After we had sung a psalm and engaged in a word o' prayer, he began to read the last pairt o' the fifth chapter o' Mattha, and when he cam' to the fortieth verse: "And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also," Dauvid hovered a blink. Then he re-read it very slowly, and says he, "Freens, I've aye prided mysel' in my knowledge o' the Bible; but I'm forced to admit that this is the first time I ever noticed that there was evidence in Scripture o' oor Saviour havin' been ployin' wi' litigations and in the lawyers' hauns. I dinna ken hoo far He carrit His case, but if my experience was His, He need not have said *let* him have thy cloak, for the hungry deevils wad ha'e ta'en it whether or no'."'

I wonder, did Betty imagine that the recital of that story would divert my mind from the subject of our conversation and the purpose I had in view? Somehow I think, as an inspiration, the means to this end had suddenly occurred to her; but, if such was her aim, the hastily conceived plot failed.

By a good deal of argument and a modicum of cajolery, I gained my point. What the

terms are which we have arranged is Betty's concern and mine only. All I may say here is that the weekly amount has to be paid to Nathan, of whom more anon, and that the subject of pounds, shillings, and pence has never to be broached in her hearing again.

She said 'Good-night' to me an hour ago. The impatient sounds of remonstrance from the soo-cruive at the head of the garden subsided shortly after she left me, from which I argued that the inner wants of the occupant had been attended to. The chop-chopping of vegetables on the kitchen table below ceased half-an-hour ago, and I know that a little at least of to-morrow's dinner has ceased to trouble Betty's anxious mind.

The shades of night are gathering round me. A soft breeze stirs the branches of the lime-trees, and through my open window it fans my face where I lie. Somewhere away Rashbrigward, I hear the quivering yammer of a startled whaup, and the crooning lullaby of the whispering Nith falls like music on my ear. In the ryegrass field at the top of the Gallowsflat a wandering landrail, elusive and challenging, craiks his homeward way; while from Cample Strath or Closeburn Heights is fitfully wafted to me the warning bark of a farmer's dog. The clamp-clamp of a cadger's

tired-out horse and the rattle of an empty cart sound loud and long in the deserted street. Hurrying footsteps echo and re-echo, and gradually die away into silence. Then evening's wings are folded o'er me, a blissful peace and a quiet contentment fill my heart, and under the glamour and spell of nature's benediction I turn my head on my grateful pillow.

CHAPTER II.

NATHAN HEBRON is Betty Grier's husband; or, rather, I should say, Betty Grier is Nathan Hebron's wife. This may possibly be considered a distinction without a difference; but when you have been introduced into the inner courts of these two worthies' acquaintance, you will somehow feel that the latter assertion is the more correct and appropriate.

Nathan is a tall, loosely built man, with a fresh, healthy complexion, mild blue eyes, and a slightly hanging under-lip. For some considerable time he has been employed on what is locally known as 'the Duke's wark,' but in what particular capacity I cannot very well say. When first I knew him he was one of Archie Maxwell's employés in the nursery, and when our garden required professional attention it was always Nathan who was sent to do the necessary digging and titivating.

Three or maybe four times a year he spent a few days at a stretch among our vegetables and fruit-trees; and I remember with what eager interest I used to anticipate his visits,

for, though he was a man of few words, and from a story-telling standpoint had little to commend him to a boy, he carried a quiet, companionable atmosphere with him, and, as a more dominating recommendation, he was the possessor of one of the sharpest and most formidable-looking 'gullies' I had ever seen.

How I envied him at pruning-time, when, with his easy, indifferent gait, he moved about among our rose-bushes with his keen hooked blade, and with one deft cut lopped off twigs and branches as if they were potato-suckers. Sometimes at my request he would lay his long gleaming weapon in the palm of my little hand, but he usually retained possession of it by a slight finger-and-thumb grip; and I always heaved a sigh of satisfaction, not unmixed with relief, when he lifted it, closed the blade with a click, and returned it to his sleeved-vest pocket.

When Nathan was thus employed in our garden he always had dinner with Betty in the kitchen. Betty's forte in the culinary department was broth-making, and my mother used to say, with a smile, that when Nathan was her guest Betty always put her best foot foremost. Betty, with a blushing cheek, mildly repudiated the charge; and once, when in my presence my mother told Nathan of this, he

blushed too, and to hide his confusion bent his head and tightened the trousers-straps under his knees.

Broth, with boiled beef and potatoes to follow, as a rule constituted Betty's menu on these occasions, and there was always a 'word' between them when the beef was served, as Nathan insisted on retaining his soup-plate from which to eat it, and to this Betty strenuously objected. She declared 'it wasna the thing;' but he retorted that 'that was possible, but it was aye ae plate less to wash, and he liked the broth brae wi' the barley piles in it, as it moistened the tatties.'

Immediately after his repast he retired to the stick-house; and there, seated on the chopping-log, he smoked his pipe in silence and meditation till the Auld Kirk clock chimed the hour of one.

Betty was no vocalist; but on those days when Nathan worked in our garden she indulged much in what, out of gallantry towards her, I may call sweet sounds. She had only one song—it is her sole musical possession still—and during the years I spent far from the friends and scenes of my boyhood, as often as I heard the familiar strains of 'The Farmer's Boy,' Betty's timmer rendering came homely-like to my ear, and I saw a print-gowned,

pensive-faced young woman subjecting newly washed delf to a vigorous rubbing, and watching through the kitchen window a big eident gardener turning over with gleaming spade the rich loamy garden soil.

My mind harks back on these little scraps of memory as I sit here in my bedroom listening to Betty's ceaseless prattle and Nathan's monosyllabic responses. He is the same gaunt, silent Nathan, only much grayer, and his short beard, fringe-like, now covers a chin which once was clean-shaven and ruddy. He still wears leather straps on his workaday trousers; and, though I haven't seen it, I am confident the keen-bladed gully is somewhere about the recesses of his ample pockets. And he is Betty's 'man,' and Betty is his busy, careful wife, and as such they sit together in that kitchen taking their meals off that self-same table, and looking out on that same garden which long ago was the scene of his periodical labours.

Sometimes of a morning I waken about five o'clock, and even thus early I hear Betty downstairs making preparations for Nathan's breakfast. I know full well from the different sounds how she is employed; and, in rotation, I note the 'ripein' oot' of the previous evening's fire, the filling of the kettle from the

kitchen tap, the opening and closing of the corner cupboard door, and the clatter of cups, plates, and cutlery. Then the merry song of the boiling kettle, the clink of the frying-pan on the crooks, the sizzling of frying ham, the splutter of gravy-steeped eggs, and the drawing forward of white, well-scrubbed kitchen chairs.

I know, too, when Nathan has finished his meal, as he always puts his empty cup and saucer with a 'clank' into his bread-plate, gives a hard throat 'hoast,' backs his chair away from the table, and says 'Imphm! juist so!' very contentedly and cheerily. Soon the appetising aroma of fried ham and eggs, which has been all the time in my nostrils, gives place to the more pungent smell of strong brown twist smoked through a clean clay pipe. This, however, is merely a whiff in passing, because Nathan 'stands not upon the order of his going,' and in clean-smelling corduroys and a cloud of fragrant pipe-reek he goes out into the early morning sunshine, closing the door with a lingering, hesitating turn of the handle, which, though gentle, seems loud and grating in the hush of the dawning day.

How I wish I could walk with him these beautiful fresh sunny mornings along the Carronbrig road! I follow him, alas! in

imagination only; and as he leaves the empty echoing street and passes under the leafy canopy of the Cundy Wood I feel the pure caller air on my brow, I listen to the hum of the bees in the limes, the sportive chatter of the sparrows in the bushes, the rich, full-throated melody of the blackbird and mavis from the wooded recesses of the Gillfoot—each feathered minstrel piping his own song in his own way, and all in unison singing their pæans of praise in their leafy, sun-kissed bowers. Gossamer-webs, silvered with countless pearls of dew, stretch their glistening threads from leaf to leaf, and cover the shady side of the hawthorn hedgerows as with a gray-meshed silken veil. From rank, dewy grass humble blue-bells raise their heads, and nod good-morning to white and blue-red stately foxgloves standing sentinel o'er scarred red-earth banks and tangled bramble thickets. Lowing cows, knee-deep in meadow grass and buttercups, with swishing tails and pawing forelegs, impatiently await the opening gate. And over all, on field and wood and hill and dale, lie the glorious rays of God's own sunshine, diffusing warmth and gladness, and filling nature anew with pulsing life.

The road lies broad and white before me, and I see Nathan's tall, gaunt figure passing

Longmire Mains, and I know the smell of the sweet American gean is in his nostrils, and his gardener's eye is on the fronded hart's-tongue ferns which here and there peep from the crevices of the lichen-covered dike; by Meadow Bank, where the purple bloom still crowns the spiked leaf branch of the rhododendron; on between the hollies and silver birches at Dabton; through the sleepy village of Carronbrig, where he is joined by moleskin-clad fellow-workers.

Staff in hand and pipe in mouth, at that regulation pace which is well known as 'the Duke's step,' each wends his way through the green turf holm, across the Nith by the stepping-stones, under the shadow of the ruin-crowned Tibbers mound. As they near the scene of their daily darg, tobacco 'dottles' are paper-padded and made secure, pipes are deposited in sleeved-vest pockets, and where the white iron wicket clicks and admits them to the low-lying stretch of fairy garden plots and multicoloured perfumed bowers I take my leave of them. God grant I may soon be able to see with the living eye, and feel with the nature-loving heart, the beauties and joys which now in imagination only are mine!

By degrees, and at rare intervals, Betty has relieved her mind to me regarding Nathan.

When I say 'relieved her mind,' I do not imply that there is anything in Nathan's conduct or any remissness in his mode of living which burdens Betty's thoughts. Far from it. Nathan is the best of husbands—appreciative, kind, steady, and considerate. His wages—to the uttermost farthing—are regularly given up to Betty's safe keeping. All his spare hours are devoted to the large garden, whose produce from January till December makes Betty's daily dinner of the bienest. Her slightest wish is a command which he obeys with cheerfulness and alacrity, and the quiet and composure of his presence is, I know, her secret pride and mainstay. Yet she seems to be ever apologising for his being about, and in speaking of him to me she invariably refers to him as 'Nathan, puir falla,' with just the slightest suggestion of commiseration in her tone.

I wonder why this should be, and it is beginning to dawn upon me that Betty somehow imagines—wrongly, needless to say—that I look upon him as an intruder, something foreign to the element of our home-life of long ago; and, stranger still, I am conscious of that feeling in Nathan also. Though I have been resident here for over two weeks, and though he has cried upstairs to me every evening, he has only been twice in my room; and on

both occasions he stood awkwardly at the door, holding on by the handle, and answering my questions with his head turned toward the landing. During the past week I have managed to limp my way downstairs, and on passing through the kitchen have stayed my steps to ca' the crack with him. But 'Yes, sir,' 'No, sir,' 'Ay, ay; imphm!' have so far been the sum-total of his contribution to the conversation. Some day, however, I know Nathan will thaw; some day soon they will both know the high esteem in which I hold him. In due season he will rid himself of his backwardness and shyness, and I shall be glad, for his honest blue eye and his pleasing serenity appeal to me, and I feel I want a friend like Nathan Hebron.

To-night, after she had cleared away the remains of my homely supper, Betty sat down with her knitting at my little attic window. I have two pots of flowering musk and a lovely pelargonium in full bloom on my sill, and under pretence of procuring Nathan's advice as to their culture and well-being I inquired of Betty if she would ask him to come upstairs.

'Most certainly, Maister Weelum,' said she, with a pleasant nod; and she went out, returning a minute later with Nathan in her

wake. I know he had been sitting in his easy-chair smoking in silence, with his stem-bonnet on and his shirt-sleeves rolled up, inactive, yet alert and ready to fulfil any of Betty's little behests; but at Betty's summons he had hastily donned a coat, and his head was bare.

After leisurely examining my plants and drawling out a few disjointed directions, he turned to go downstairs; but I motioned him to a seat, and, rather reluctantly, I thought, he sat down. I urged him to join me in a smoke, and offered him a fill of my Edinburgh mixture; but he declined my pouch; and, taking out a deerskin spleuchan, he nipped a full inch of brown twist, teased it, rolled it in the palm of his rough, horny hand, and meditatively filled the bowl of his clay cutty.

Betty noticed my little act of civility; but she plied her needles in silence till Nathan had struck a light and begun smoking.

'Ay, Maister Weelum,' she said, as Nathan fitted the glowing bowl of his pipe with a perforated metal cover, 'thae fancy ready-cut tobaccos are no' much in the line o' oor Nathan, puir falla.'

'Is that so? Well, every man to his own taste; but, Betty, excuse my asking so personal

a question, why do you always refer to your goodman here as "Nathan, puir falla"?'

Nathan looked surprisedly from me to Betty, and, after fumbling with his match-box, struck another light when there was no necessity to do so; while Betty laid her knitting on the table and thoughtfully pressed it out lengthwise with the palm of her open hand.

'When ye mention it, noo, I daur say I div say "puir falla,"' she answered; 'but, though I say that, I dinna mean it in ony temporal sense, Maister Weelum. So far as this world is concerned, I've got the very best man that ever lived; but'—— and she looked at Nathan as if in doubt how to proceed.

Nathan blew pipe-reek most vigorously; then he turned round to me with a faint smile on his sober face, and he actually winked. 'She's—she's sterted again, Maister Weelum,' he said with a side-nod toward Betty.

'Started what, Nathan?'

'Oh, the auld subject—imphm!'

'Ay,' chimed in Betty, now sure of her opening, 'it's an auld subject, but it's ever a new yin, a' the same. "'Tis old, yet ever new," as the hymn-book has it. Ay, an' that *is* true. As I said before, Maister Weelum, I've nae concern regairdin' Nathan's welfare in this world. We're promised only bread an' water,

an' look hoo often he gets tea an' chops, an' on what we ha'e saved there 's every chance o' that diet bein' continued as lang as he has teeth to chew wi'. But what o' the next world? As Tammas Fraser aince said when he was takin' the Book, "Ah, that 's where the rub comes in!"' and she shook her head dolefully, as much as to say, 'Nathan, you 're a gone corbie!'

I looked from husband to wife in blank astonishment, not knowing what to say. I had always looked upon Betty as a deeply religious woman, a true disciple of the Great Master, but partaking more of the loving John than the assertive Peter; and, often as I had heard her say a word in season, I could not remember having listened to her expressing so pointedly her fears and convictions.

She interpreted my thoughts aright; and after Nathan had, without necessity, sparked another match, and almost succeeded in turning toward us the full length and breadth of his long tankard back, she resumed.

'Your mother was a guid woman, Maister Weelum, an' I ken that often, often, you were the burden o' her prayers. I never talked much on this subject to you, kennin' that you were her ain particular chairge, an' that her prayers, withoot my interference, wad be an-

swered. But it 's different in the case o' Nathan here. He belangs to me, an' me to him. My calling an' election 's sure, an' I juist canna bide the thocht o' us bein' separated at the lang hinner-en'. It 's no' that he 's a bad man—far from it. Or it 's no' that he 's careless. I gi'e him credit for bein' concerned in his ain wey; but he juist saunters on through life, trustin' that things will somewey work oot a' richt, an' lettin' the want, if there 's ony, come in at the wab's end. Ay, an' for a man like him, that 's sae fond o' flo'ers an' dogs an' ither folks' weans, it simply passes my comprehension hoo it is that he 's sae indifferent to the greatest o' a' love an' the things that so closely concern his immortal soul's salvation. Nae wonder I say, "Nathan, puir falla."'

Notwithstanding the gravity of the charge she had laid at Nathan's door, I felt relieved to know that my surmises regarding the cause of his attitude toward me were unfounded; and, with a note of encouragement in my voice, I hinted to Betty that, after all, it was possible she was unnecessarily worrying herself, as with two advocates like her and my mother it would surely be well with both Nathan and me.

'Ah, Maister Weelum,' she said impressively, 'I ken fine that the prayers o' the just availeth

much; but aye bear in mind—Nathan, are ye listenin'?—Ay—weel, bear in mind that every herrin' maun hing by its ain heid. Mind that, the twae o' ye noo.'

This direct personal appeal rather discomposed me, and I didn't know what to say. As for Nathan, he rose slowly from his chair, and, turning round, he solemnly winked to me again. That wink somehow sealed a compact between us. It placed us on a common platform, and established a feeling of camaraderie which it would be hard for me to define.

'Ay, Betty,' he said, as he raised himself to his full height, 'you're a wonderfu' woman—a wonderfu' woman!' and he yawned audibly; 'an' when it comes to gab wark on sic a subject as ye've ta'en in haun', John Clerk the colporteur canna haud a cannel to ye. When ye stert on me like this I aye gi'e ye plenty o' rope, an' I never gi'e it a tug; but ye've gi'en me a gey tatterin' afore Maister Weelum here, an' I wad just like to put in my yelp noo.'

Betty gave him a surprised look, and I nodded and smiled encouragingly toward him.

'I don't misdoot,' he continued, after he had loosened his cravat at his throat, 'that there's some truth in a few o' your remarks; but,

dod, lass, dinna forget that I 'm tryin' my best.'

'In what wey, Nathan?' she promptly asked.

'Weel, let me consider noo. Ay, I don't think I ha'e missed a day at the kirk since we were mairret. That 's ae thing, onywey. Then we tak' the Beuk regularly; an' forby that, Betty,' he said impressively, 'I was five times at the prayer-meetin's wi' ye last year, and '——

'Prayer-meetin's!' said Betty; 'prayer-meetin's!' and she raised her voice. 'Nathan Hebron, I 'm astonished ye ha'e the audacity to mention prayer-meetin's to me!'

'Hoo that, Betty?' he gravely asked.

'Hoo that? As if ye didna ken! My word, but that 's yin an' a half!—Do you know this Maister Weelum; I had to stop takin' him to the prayer-meetin's, for he aye fell asleep. The last yin I took him to was at Mrs Kennedy's. Not only did he sleep, but he snored wi' his heid lyin' back an' his face to the ceilin'; an' when he waukened, it was in the middle o' a silent prayer, an' he glimmered an' blinked at the gaslicht, an' said he, wi' his een half-shut, "Betty, that 's rank wastery burnin' the gas when we 're in oor sleepin' bed." Ashamed? I was black affronted, Maister

Weelum, an' among sae mony earnest folk, too.'

Goodness knows, I hold no brief for Nathan, but I ventured to say on his behalf that, as he had been working in the open all day, and the room was quiet and warm, he was, in a way, to be excused if he unconsciously dovered.

'Ay, that's a' very weel; but I notice he never dovers, as ye ca' it, at an Oddfellows' soiree.'

Nathan had quietly slipped downstairs before she reached the end of her story, and in his absence she became confidential and communicative.

'I somewey think he means weel, but the road to hell is paved wi' guid intentions. He's maybe the best specimen of the natural man that I ken o'; but wae's me, that's no' sufficient. The seeds o' carelessness were sown lang before I kenned him; an' tho' I maun alloo he has improved in my haun', I see wee bit touches noo an' than o' the he'rt at enmity which sometimes mak' me despair. For instance, the ither Sabbath-day nae faurer gane, he sat doon efter his denner wi' a book, an' he looked neither to left nor richt, but read on and on. "Nathan," says I, "what's the book you're sae intent on?" "Oh, Betty," says he glibly, weel kennin' that I didna gi'e

in wi' orra readin' on the Lord's Day, "I've faun in wi' a splendid book the day. It's ca'ed Baxter's—eh—*Saunts' Everlastin' Rest*, an' it's the kind o' readin' I like." "Ay," says I, weel pleased wi' the soond o' the title, "read on at that, Nathan. Baxter's fu' o' rich refreshin' truths. Read slow noo, Nathan, an' tak' it a' in." Weel, he never put it oot o' his haun till bedtime, except when he was at his tea, an' then he slipped it into his coat-pocket; an' the next day, when he was away at his wark, I cam' on it stappit doon behin' the cushion o' his easy-chair; an' what think ye it was, Maister Weelum? Guess noo what it was.'

'Baxter's *Saints' Everlasting Rest*, of course,' I said.

'Weel,' said Betty, 'that was printed on the loose covers that had aince been the boards o' the holy volume o' that name; but the paper-covered book that was inside was *The Experiences o' an Edinburgh Detective*, by James MacGovan; an' d'ye ken this, Maister Weelum, I juist sat doon in the middle o' my wark an' grat my he'rt-fill.'

Poor, dear Betty, she wept anew at the remembrance of Nathan's lapse, then rolled her knitting into her apron, and went downstairs into the kitchen. Ten minutes later, when I

was having my last pipe for the night, I heard her voice raised in the Beuk, and she was reading, with a point and emphasis which I am sure Nathan could not misunderstand, the story from the Acts of Ananias and his wife Sapphira.

CHAPTER III.

I AM as yet only on the threshold of my stay in Thornhill, and I am beginning my long vacation as I intend to end it. Dr Balfour's orders were short and to the point; and, in bidding a temporary farewell to professional work and preparing for a long holiday, I know I am following his instructions and furthering my own interests and future well-being. Time was when this enforced inaction would have been irksome indeed. I have always been alert mentally and physically; but since my accident I have been incapable of any prolonged mental effort, and I have welcomed the languor of this quiet retreat, which has possessed me and claimed me as its own. Betty's ministrations I feel I stand in need of; and Nathan's company, unresponsive and grudging though it be, is all I desire. Betty has no patience with useless, idling folks, for she is herself a bustler, and she talks contemptuously of the hangers-on who daily and nightly support our village corners. Once she told me they were troubled with a complaint called the 'guyfaul.' I had never heard the

queer word before, and asked its meaning. 'An inclination for meat, but nane for wark,' she promptly replied; and as I lie abed these beautiful sunny forenoons I wonder if Betty considers that I also am afflicted with the 'guyfaul.'

Correspondence of an official character is tabooed; but a day or two ago I received a long newsy letter from my partner, Murray Monteith, not one line of which had any reference to business. This morning I had a further communication, almost equally free from 'shop;' but in a footnote he remarks as follows: 'We had a call yesterday from our client the Hon. Mrs Stuart, and in course of conversation she informed me that she had leased a house in the vicinity of Thornhill, and that her niece, the late General Stuart's daughter, was staying with her over the autumn. I was strongly tempted to tell her you were at present resident in that village, but refrained, knowing it would be unwise of you in the present circumstances to occupy yourself with her affairs. Our inability to find a will or to trace the record of the General's marriage troubles her very much.'

This postscript set me a-thinking, and I lay long pondering obscure points in a case which had worried and perplexed every one concerned.

Not only was the good name of the Stuart family involved; but, in the absence of proof, the General's daughter must be—well, nameless, and the estate must pass to another branch of the family.

So absorbed was I in my train of reflection that I failed to note Betty's entrance with my breakfast-tray. A short cough and the clatter of china recalled my wandering thoughts, and I began a rather disjointed apology. Holding up my firm's letter with the familiar light-blue envelope, I laughingly said, 'Blame this, Betty, and forgive my inattention.'

'Hoots, ay,' said Betty, 'it 's a' richt; but ye maunna pucker your broo an' worry your brain. Deil tak' thae lang blue letters, onywey! Nane o' them that ever I got spelt weel to me; an' when Milligan the postman handed this yin in this mornin', an' when I thocht o' taxes an' sic fash, I was sairly tempted to back the fire wi' it. Imphm! that 's so, noo. Eh! by the by, the doctor's Mary looked in on the bygaun, an' she tells me Dr Grierson will likely be doon to see ye the day. He has had a letter frae a Dr Balfour o' Edinbro, tellin' him a' aboot ye, an' askin' him to keep his eye on ye. Imphm! Ay, an', Maister Weelum, ye didna tell me that ye lay a week in the infirmary insensible.'

'No, Betty,' I said, 'I dare say I didn't; but—well, the fact is I didn't wish to worry you with details or'——

'Ay, an' naether did ye tell me it was to save your wee dog's life ye gaed back into the burnin' hoose,' she said in the same inquisitive tone. I stirred my coffee vigorously, but said nothing. 'An' is it the case that the stair fell in when ye were on the middle o't, an' that the wee dog was foun' deid in your airms?'

'That is so, Betty,' I said sadly.

Betty was silent for a minute, and she fumbled aimlessly with the corner of her apron. 'Lovan,' she said at length, 'it has been a mair terrible affair than I had ony thocht o'. The heid an' the spine are kittle to get hurt, but it's a guid's blessin' ye werena burnt beyond recognition. Efter siccan an experience it's a wonder ye didna relieve your mind to me regairdin' it lang ere noo. Naebody in this world wad ha'e been mair interested or sympathetic. What wey did ye no'?'

Her concern and loving interest were unmistakable; but from the tone of her questionings I opined she was smarting under the sense of a slight, real or imagined, and I hastened to reassure her. 'My dear Betty,' I said, 'believe me I had no motive in withholding

such news other than that of saving your feelings. At one time I was minded to tell you all about it; but when you met me at Elvanfoot I noted at a glance the pained, surprised look on your face, and I at once decided not to say more than was absolutely necessary. Besides, Betty, everything happened so quickly that I can scarcely remember the details.' In a few words I described what had taken place. 'And now, Betty,' I concluded, 'let us change the subject. Even now the recollection of my experience is like a nightmare, and I would rather not speak of it.'

'Imphm!' said Betty abstractedly; 'that I daur say is no' to be wondered at. I'm sorry if my curiosity has been the means o' bringin' it a' back again; but, oh man, Maister Weelum, it gaed sair against the grain to hear o' a' this frae fremit lips. The doctor's Mary has a' the particulars at her tongue-tap, an' she gaed through it this mornin' like A B C. I could see she was under the impression that I kenned a' aboot it, an' I didna seek to disabuse her mind on that, but juist said, "Imphm! that is so, Mary—what ye say is true;" and she left my doorstep thinkin' I was farer ben in your confidences than I am. But that's a' richt, Maister Weelum. I respect your motives, an' I understaun exactly hoo ye were placed.

But, oh, my boy! in ocht that may in the future distress ye dinna leave Betty oot, an' dinna forget that her he'rt is big eneuch to haud your sorrows as weel as her ain. Wheesht! Is that the ooter door openin'? It is; an', dod, that's Dr Grierson's cheepin' buits on the lobby flaer, an' me no' snodit yet. He's an awfu' dingle-doozie in the mornin', is the doctor.'

Moistening the tips of her fingers on her lip and keeking into my little oval looking-glass, she deftly arranged a stray lock of gray-black hair under the neatly goffered border of her white morning-mutch. 'Juist a word wi' ye, Maister Weelum, before I gang doon. Are ye quite agreeable that Dr Grierson should veesit ye? He's an auld freen o' your Edinbro doctor, an' that's hoo he cam' to be written to, so the doctor's Mary tells me.'

'Oh, I'm quite agreeable, Betty—delighted, indeed,' I replied.

'Eh—ay—imphm! An' ye've nae feelin' on that point?'

'Most assuredly not,' I said. 'But why do you ask?'

She tiptoed across the floor and half-closed the door.

'That's him rappin' wi' his stick on the kitchen flaer,' she said in a whisper. 'An' tell

me this; did the mistress—your mother, I mean—ever say ocht to ye aboot the doctor an'—an' ony o' her ain folks?'

'Not that I remember of.'

'Ay, aweel, that's a' richt. When he comes up, dinna refer to my speirin' ye this;' and she hurriedly left me and went downstairs.

Thornhill has never been without its Gideon Gray. Had Dr John Brown been acquainted with its record in this particular respect he could have added to that remarkable chapter of his *Horæ Subsecivæ* the names of not a few medical benefactors, the memory of whose services is yet fragrant in our midst. Scattered here and there in many a quiet country kirk-yard are the graves of heroes of science who in their day ungrudgingly gave of their very best, faithfully ministering to the wants of the poor and needy without thought of fee or reward; men of ability, intellect, tact, and courage of heart, whose life-work lay in the sequestered bypaths, and whose names were unknown outside the glen they called their home. Of such was Dr Grierson; and as he stood by my bedside the thought momentarily flashed through my mind, would that he had been limned by Scott or by the creator of Rab and Ailie!

A little over medium height; wiry, spare,

and alert; broad shoulders slightly stooped; long dark hair streaked with gray, without a parting, brushed straight back from his forehead and hanging in clustering locks above his stock; his face serious almost, yet not void of humour, and lit up by kindly, blue, thoughtful eyes; a presence cheering and reassuring, and a bearing which bespoke the scholar and the gentleman. His clothes were of rough gray homespun, badly fitted and carelessly worn. A thin shepherd-tartan plaid, arranged herdwise, hung from his shoulder, and he held in his hand a round soft hat, gray-green from exposure to summer sun and winter rains. Such was the man who stood by my bedside—a Gideon Gray indeed—strong of purpose, keenly observant; shy, yet not suspicious; revelling in his power of doing good; inured to cold and privation; buoyant and hopeful in the face of difficulties; daily in close and loving communion with all nature around him; and girt about with truthfulness and integrity as with a cloak. Though I had never before been in his presence, I hailed him within my heart as a true and honoured friend.

He shook hands without saying good-morning, and seated himself on a chair at the foot of my bed. Betty, who had preceded

him upstairs, and announced him, walked across the room, took up a position at the gable window, and feigned an interest in our grocer neighbour's back-yard. He looked at me pointedly and earnestly, the while stroking his long straggling beard, and then, half-turning his head toward Betty, he said with a low, little laugh, and with a pronounced yet euphonious 'burr,' 'Our young friend, Betty, is more of a Kennedy than a Russell.'

'Ay, doctor, that he is,' said Betty, without taking her eyes from the window. 'He aye took efter his mither's folk. When he was a bairn o' three he was the very spit o' his aunt Marget. Not that I ha'e ony recollection o' her, but that 's what I mind the mistress used to say.'

'He 's like her yet,' the doctor promptly added.—'And in saying so I can pay no higher compliment to you, my young man.'

'I 've heard it said, doctor, that ye kenned the Kennedys aince on a time,' said Betty, and she changed the position of a pot of musk on the window-sill.

He looked quickly and questioningly at Betty; but she was busying herself with the flowers, the while humming, timmer-tuned as usual, the opening lines of 'The Farmer's Boy.'

Then he looked from her to me, slowly and deliberately crossed his legs, and, putting his long, thin hands lengthwise on his knee, he said, more to himself than to Betty, 'Yes, yes, I, as you say, once knew them well.'

'Ye wad ken Miss Marget, then?' asked Betty after a pause.

To me Betty's questioning was an enigma; but I wasn't slow to notice it was distinctly disconcerting to the doctor, who quickly changed his position and sat with his back to the light.

'Miss Marget and I were very, very dear friends,' he said, 'very dear friends, a long, long time ago;' and he abstractedly traced with the tip of his finger an irregular circle round the brim of his old soft hat.

Betty with a flick of her apron removed imaginary dust from the window-sill, and then, coming up to the doctor, she laid her hand on the back of his chair. 'In that case, then, doctor,' she earnestly said, 'for her sake, for Miss Marget's sake, ye 'll do your best for her nephew, for it breaks my he'rt to see him lyin' there amaist as helpless as a bairn.' And she hurriedly left the room, and I don't know for certain, but I think she was crying.

The doctor rose, quietly closed the door, and resumed his seat.

'Betty has undoubtedly your welfare at heart, Mr Russell,' he said. 'Unconsciously, or maybe consciously, she has awakened many memories of the long ago—memories of times and people that are with me now only in dreams. Ay, ay;' and he passed his hand slowly adown his face. 'But this is not getting on with my work,' he said, after a pause.

Putting his hand in his coat pocket, he brought out, not a handkerchief, as he had intended or as I expected, but a rather sickly-looking hart's-tongue fern, the root of which was carefully wrapped in a piece of newspaper and tied with a bootlace.

'Well, well!' he said reproachfully, turning it over in his hand, 'that is indeed stupid of me. I ought to have planted this immediately on my arrival this morning; but fortunately I was careful to take sufficient soil with it, and maybe it is not yet too late.'

'Have you been from home, doctor?' I asked.

'Oh, only for twelve hours,' he said, returning the plant to his pocket. 'I was on the point of going to bed last night, when the Benthead shepherd called me out to attend his wife. He was driving an old nag I knew well, a Mitchelslacks pensioner—willing enough, you may be sure, or he wouldn't have been owned

by a Harkness, but long past his best; so, in order to be as soon as possible beside my patient, I quickly saddled my own mare, and was trotting down the Gashouse Brae when the kirk clock was striking eleven. I passed the old nag near Laught; but unfortunately at Camplemill Daisy cast a shoe; so, rather than trouble the smith at such an untimely hour, I put her into his stable, the door of which was unlocked, waited the upcoming of the shepherd, and drove the rest of the journey with him in his spring-cart. After sitting for an hour or two at a smoky peat fire, reading by the aid of a guttering tallow-candle a back-number of the *Agricultural Gazette*, I was called to work, and very soon added another arrow—the tenth—to the shepherd's quiver. When everything was "a' bye," as we say locally, Benthead kindly offered to drive me down to the mill; but, as the early morning was so delightfully fine, and nature outside so pleading and inviting, I took to the moor on "Shanks' naigie." Ah, the delight of that moorland walk! the exhilarating air of the uplands! Why, man, it was like quaffing wine, and the cobwebs—warp and woof of the sleepless hours—were charmed away as if by magic. The sun was just peeping over the crest of Bellybucht,

and his rays were lying lovingly athwart the budding heather and the silver mist-wreathed bents. Bracken and juniper, blaeberry and crowberry; dewdrops here, dewdrops there, sparkling and shimmering; tiny springs of crystal water oozing out from whinstone chinks, gurgling and trickling down pebbled ruts, seen awhile, then unseen, lost in spongy moss and tangled seggs. Overhead the morning song of the gladsome lark; to my right the *wheep* of the snipe and the quack of a startled duck; to my left the *yittering* of the curlew and the *chirrup* of the flitting, restless cheeper; and over all the spirit of the wild which isolates and draws within her mantle-folds all those who cuddle close to Nature's breast. Ah, what a morning! what a scene! Hat in hand I walked, with my head bared to the throbbing air and the glorious sunshine. "Surely, surely," I said to myself, "it is good for me to be here;" and with a sense of thankfulness in my heart, and turning my face to the shadowy Lowthers, I sang with the Psalmist, "I to the hills will lift mine eyes."

'I struck the Crichope about six o'clock; wandered leisurely down the linn; pulled this hart's-tongue fern, and a few more which I must have lost; picked up this fossil—part of a frog, I think—which will make a welcome

addition to my collection.' He hesitated for a moment, with half-closed eyes and his chin resting on his folded stock. Then he suddenly looked toward me and asked, 'Have you ever walked down Crichope alone?'

'No, not alone,' I replied.

'Then Crichope has never spoken to you. You have never heard its message. To me, this morning, it was the mouthpiece of the Creator—the great Architect; *for I was alone.* With those who love and admire His handiwork He is ever in communion, and He speaks in the rustle of the leaf, the tinkle of the stream, the whisper of the grass, and the echo of the linn. But you must be alone, humble, reverent, stripped to the pelt, as it were, of everything sordid, boastful, and vainglorious; and then that old ravine will be a sanctuary where in its solitude you will find solace, comfort in its caverns, food for reflection in its story and traditions.'

Again he paused, and I lay with eager eyes fixed on his animated face. Betty's cat, with arched back and long tail, brushed slowly past his knee. With an ingratiating 'Pussy, puss,' he stroked her fur.

'About half-past seven,' he continued, 'I reached the smithy, had a cup of tea with Smith Martin and his wife, got Daisy's shoe made

siccar, and was mounting for home, when news was brought from Dresserland that a farm-worker had fallen from his cart and broken his leg. Off Daisy and I trotted up the brae. But, tut! tut! why should I waste my precious time, and weary and fatigue you to boot, by detailing all my morning round?'

'Oh, doctor, don't stop!' I pleaded. 'I know and love that whole countryside, and a talk with you is like a walk in the open. Indeed, my limbs twitched as you strode along, and I felt as if I were keeping step with you.'

'Ay, your limbs twitched, did they? That's a good sign.'

'A sign of my appreciation of your love of nature and poetry of language, doctor?' I asked.

'No, no; something far more important than appreciation. But this is not business. I know you will be anxious to learn in how far Dr Balfour and I agree, so let me have a look at that damaged spine of yours.'

Betty tells me that she 's 'feart the doctor 's a careless, godless man, for he never enters a kirk door.' I could have told her that he had attended church that morning, and that he had had communion with God and a glimpse of heaven which would have been an unknown

experience and an unfamiliar sight to many who occupy a church pew every Sunday; but Betty wouldn't have understood—nay, wouldn't have believed me—and I was silent.

His visit has cheered and encouraged me, and his conversation has made me proud of his acquaintance. He is to call on me again in a few days; and meanwhile I have to take more exercise; so with the aid of a friendly hazel I shall have a daily 'daunder' and an opportunity of renewing my acquaintance with Douglas the barber in his wee back-room, John Sterling the shoemaker at his souter's stool, and Deacon Webster at his tool-laden bench.

CHAPTER IV.

TOM JARDINE the grocer—Betty's next-door neighbour—will be thirty-four years old on the 23rd of January next. He is to a day exactly four years my senior. I remember it was when his mother and Betty were putting out clothes together in the back-green that I, a boy of five, heard for the first time that we had a birthday in common.

To me the fact vested Tom with a special interest. I looked upon him in more than a mere neighbourly spirit. Though we were rarely associated in our boys' games, we often casually met about the doors or had disjointed conversations through the garden hedge; and on these occasions the desire was always strong within me to talk of our birthday, and to ask if he wasn't wearying for the 23rd to come round. And when that auspicious date was ushered in, and my birthday-cake, in all its white-iced glory, was ceremoniously placed before me at table, I used to wonder if Tom had one also, and if he, like me, had the honour of cutting and distributing it.

On looking back, I cannot remember when

the Jardines were not our neighbours. Long ago Robert Jardine, Tom's father, was a tenant of ours, and twice a year, at the Martinmas and Whitsunday terms, he called upon us; and when the rent had been paid and sundry repairs and alterations agreed upon, he and my father drank a glass of wine together. It had, however, long been the height of Robert's ambition to be the owner of his own roof-tree. Times then being good, he soon saved the amount necessary to effect a purchase; and after many calls and conferences, terms were ultimately arranged to the satisfaction of both vender and buyer.

Tom was the youngest of a large family, the other members of which had all emigrated; and when Robert Jardine died—his wife had predeceased him by a few years—there was no one else to look after affairs. Tom at once gave up a responsible position in a wholesale grocery establishment in Glasgow, came south with a wife and three young children, and took over what I now understand every Thornhill villager believed to be a dying, if not an altogether dead, concern.

All these changes had taken place in my absence during these past fourteen years; but it was nevertheless pleasing to me to know from Betty, shortly after my return, that as

neighbours the family was still represented, the more so as the representative in question was none other than my old friend Tom.

In describing my attic room I omitted to say that it has a little, round, gable window through which, from my fireside chair, I can look down upon the Jardines' back-yard. Long ago I used to sit here and watch old Robert grooming his horse, cleaning his harness, and packing his long-bodied spring-cart with bags of flour or meal, and grocery parcels of tea and sugar, for distribution on his long cadger rounds.

During the past few weeks my interest has often been centred on his son similarly employed. Tom sings and whistles cheery tunes as he works, and his iron-shod clogs make a merry clatter on the stone-paved court. His wife and the two eldest children—blue-eyed, curly-haired bairns they are—give him willing help, and, standing in his cart or on a chair placed beside the wheel, he cheerily receives and checks off in a weather-beaten note-book the various articles for his country clients.

Like Nathan, Tom is no lie-abed in the morning. Of necessity he must be up betimes, for his journeys are often long and his days are always too short. When Betty is preparing the early breakfast I hear Tom's ring-

ing footstep outside, the turning of the key in the stable-door lock, and the anticipating whinny of the gray mare. Then a horse-pail is filled from the tap at the stable-door; a minute later it is returned empty and deposited outside; the lid of the corn-bin, which has been poised on its creeky hinges, descends with a bang, and I know that his faithful dappled friend has her nose buried in countless piles of sweet-smelling corn.

Betty is not an inquisitive woman, nor does she interest herself in a meddling way in her neighbours' concerns; yet her big, kindly heart and her never-failing sympathetic nature invite many confidences, and she is therefore more fully versed in what I might call the inward life of those around her than many of a more zealously prying and newsvending disposition.

We were talking one day about the Jardines of a past generation, and our conversation naturally turned to Tom. I commended him for his industry, for his sobriety, and for the undivided attention he gave to his business, and finished up by asking if he was a successful man. Betty made no reply; but she shook her head doubtfully, from which I argued that it was not all sunshine and whistling and singing with our young grocer neighbour; and as

she showed no desire to continue the conversation, I allowed the matter to drop.

After tea, however, she reverted to the subject, and reopened our chat by asking if it was usual in business for a son to take over his dead father's debts.

In my short professional career I remembered one such case, in which I was interested, but only one, and I told her of it. I didn't go into details, but gave her the bald outstanding points; and after I had finished she said, 'Ay, and that's the only case ye ever heard o'?'

'Yes, that is so, Betty,' I replied.

She was standing at the round gable window, vacantly looking down into our neighbour's back-yard. Then I saw her eyebrows begin to pucker, and I knew there was something on her mind.

'Maister Weelum,' she said at length, 'I've nae concern in the ongauns o' the folks aboot me, an' I never talk aboot them. But ye asked me regairdin' Tom Jardine, an' I'm no' betrayin' ony confidences when I tell ye that young Tom took ower his dead faither's debts, so that will be twae cases ye ken o'.'

'Tom Jardine!' I said with surprise. 'Surely Robert Jardine wasn't in debt when he died?'

'That he was, Maister Weelum—the mair's the pity. Ye see, for a lang time—I micht say for at least five years afore he died—he wasna able to gang his roons; in fact, he was barely able to stand ahint the coonter. Younger an' mair active competitors took up the same gr'und; an' what wi' failin' trade, increasin' competition, an' cuttin' prices, there wasna a livin' in it. Then his wife had a lang, lingerin' illness, an' when she slippit away he kind o' lost he'rt. I was often wae for him, puir man, an' I did a' I could for him in my ain sma' wey. Except to yin or twae he keepit a smilin' face, though, aye wrote cheerily to Tom, an' gaed to kirk an' market as lang as he was able wi' his heid in the air; but, losh me! when his time cam' it was nae surprise to me an' yin or twae mair that the whole affair—shop, hoose, an' business—didna show much mair than ten shillin's in the pound. Tom—him that's doon there noo—was in a guid wey o' doin' in Glesca, an' nothing wad ser' him but he bood come hame an' tak' things in haun. He was strongly advised to have nothing to do wi' it, an' to let the creditors handle what was left as best it was likely to pay them. But Tom said, "No." All he asked frae the creditors was time an' secrecy as far as was possible as to how things stood, an' frae the Almighty health

an' strength, an', given these, he promised to clear his dead faither's name an' see every yin get his ain. That 's three years ago past the May term, an', honour an' praise to the puir laddie, he 's nearly succeeded. But it has been a terrible struggle for him; an' had it no' been for his determination, his sobriety, his pride in his faither's guid name, an' abune a' the help o' a lovin' wife wha 's a perfect mother in Israel, he wad ha'e gi'en it up lang or noo as an impossible, thankless job. Nathan and me lent his faither sixty pounds. We had nae writin' to speak o', only his signed name. I showed the paper to Tom shortly efter he had settled doon here, an' instead o' questionin' it he thanked us for our kindness an' promised to pay it back in the same proportion as the ithers. Up to noo we 've got back thirty pounds. I was in his shop the ither day, an' he said he thocht he wad be able to gi'e 's anither ten pounds at the November term. What think ye o' that noo, Maister Weelum?'

'I think your neighbour is a splendid fellow, Betty, and I would like to shake hands with him. Have you the paper beside you on which his father's name appears for sixty pounds?'

'Ay, that I have,' said Betty. She went downstairs, and returned a minute later with a sheet of notepaper.

I glanced at the unstamped promise, and smiled. 'Betty,' I said seriously, 'are you aware this is not worth the paper it is written on?'

'Ay, perfectly,' she said with unconcern.

'How did you find that out?' I inquired.

'Oh, when I showed it to Tom Jardine he used exactly the same words as you did; but, said he, "My faither signed that. I have every confidence in you an' Nathan. My faither an' mither thought the world o' ye, an' wi' my assurance that ye'll be paid back, I tender you my best thanks for your kindness in time o' need."'

Betty folded up her worthless document and put it in the breast of her gown. 'An honest man like Tom Jardine makes up for a lot o' worthless yins, Maister Weelum,' she said as she lifted her tea-tray; and I looked through the wee round window to Tom's back-yard with an increased appreciation of the coatless and hatless grocer, who was sitting down on an empty soap-box with a long needle and a roset-end, mending his old gray mare's collar.

It has rained continuously for three days, and according to Nathan something has gone very far wrong, as St Swithin's Day from early morn to dewy eve was cloudless and fair, and

accordingly we had every right to anticipate forty days of dry, fine weather.

Harvest is early with us this year. The corn, which was waving green when Betty and I drove south from Elvanfoot, is already studding the fields in regular rows of yellow stooks, and but for this break in the weather it would even now be on its way to the stackyard in groaning, creaking carts. The Newton pippins on the apple-tree at the foot of the garden are showing a bright red cheek, and the phloxes and gladioli in the plot at the kitchen window are crowned with a mass of bloom so rich and luxuriant that every one of Betty's cooking utensils reflects their colourings and appears to be blushing rosy-red. During these past three days I have missed Tom's cheery song, and I am beginning to wonder if the gloomy weather has chilled his lightsome heart and silenced the chords of his tuneful throat.

Time was when I loved to be abroad on a rainy day, whether as an unprotected boy fishing away up Capel Linn and Cample Cleugh, with the rain dribbling down the neck-band of my shirt and oozing through the lace-holes of my boots, or as a man with waterproof and hazel staff, breasting the scarred side of Caerketton or the grassy slopes of Allermuir, with the pelting, pitiless raindrops blinding

my eyes and stinging my cheek, and the vivid fire of heaven lighting up Halkerside and momentarily showing the short zigzag course of that 'nameless trickle' whose rippling music the Wizard of Swanston loved.

How I enjoyed these Pentland rambles, alone in the rain and the soughing winds! Underfoot, the dank, sodden grass and the broken fern; overhead, the sombre sky, the scurrying clouds, and the drifting mist; on every side the grassy mounds of the Dunty Knowes, with their shivering birks tossing to windward, and a rain-soaked hogg beneath every sheltering crag. Alone, yet not alone; for a Presence was with me, guiding me on, showing me through the gathering gloom the sun-bathed crown of Allermuir, bringing to my ear from out the rage of the storm the wail of the curlew, and summoning to my side the plaided shepherd 'Honest John' and his gray, rough-coated collie Swag.

Ah, these are memories only! memories only! for Cample Cleugh and Capel Linn are lost to me with my boyhood. No more am I the strong, able-bodied lover of the open, moving with firm, sure step among scenes which a master's touch has made immortal; but a poor, crippled, pain-racked invalid, as parochial in feeling as in outlook, sitting in an

easy-chair by an attic fire, watching through a rain-washed window-pane a scene which fills me with forebodings and touches my heart to the very quick.

Down there in the courtyard, where the water in the imperfect pavement is lying in muddy pools, Tom Jardine, hatless, coatless, and regardless of the splashing rain, is walking to and fro like a lion in his cage. His face is set and white, his finger-tips clenched in the palm of his hand, and there is an anxious, troubled expression in his eye which recalls memories of unfortunate, harassed clients. For a moment he stands with feet apart and eyes dolefully fixed on the wet, sloppy flagstones. A door quietly opens, a tiny, smiling-faced figure darts through the rain, and in an instant two round, bare, chubby arms are encircling his knee, and a fair, curly head is nestling against his thigh. But there is no fatherly response to the loving embrace, no reply to the childish prattle. With a jerky wrench Tom frees himself from the wee, cuddling arms, and two wide-opened, surprised blue eyes follow him as again, in thoughtful measured tread, he walks up and down and up and down. Then red dimpled knuckles are pressed into these blue eyes, a sob breaks from a wounded little heart, and Tom comes to a sudden halt. In

an instant his clouded face is wreathed in smiles and beams with loving solicitude. Bending down, he lifts the sobbing morsel; and as he disappears through the kitchen doorway with the precious burden in his strong arms and his hungry lips pressed against a soft red cheek, I say to myself, with a heavy, welling heart, 'Tom, you surely have your troubles, but as surely you have the antidote.'

CHAPTER V.

OF late I have noticed that Betty, in the course of our frequent cracks, has with considerable tact and adroitness turned the topic of our conversation into channels matrimonial and domestic. I know full well that my state of celibacy is to her a subject of wonderment and speculation; but, though other cases similar to my own have been commented upon—threshed to chaff, I may say—she has never, until to-day, come to close quarters, and vested the matter with any direct personal application. How she manœuvred and worked her way round was distinctly characteristic, but not worth detailing; and I shall not readily forget the surprise, and, I might say, incredulity, with which she received my assertion that I had never married for the very simple reason that I had never been in love.

With her head thoughtfully to one side, she plied her needles assiduously. 'Ye 're—let me see noo, ye 'll be '——

'Thirty next birthday, Betty,' I promptly answered.

'Ay, imphm! Ye're quite richt; ye're juist exactly that, an' nae mair. Lovan me, imphm!' and she laughed and looked toward me. 'And, eh! d'ye mean to tell me—seriously noo—that ye're here at this time o' day withoot havin' met ony young leddy ye could mak' your wife?'

She was probing very near the quick, and I puffed vigorously at my pipe. 'Seriously and truthfully, Betty, I haven't yet met the woman I could marry.'

'Gosh me! that *is* maist extraordinar', Maister Weelum, an' you within a cat's jump o' thirty. It's almost inconceivable! It strikes me ye havena been lookin' aboot ye very eidently, for it's no' as if there was a scarcity o' womenfolk. There's aye routh to pick an' choose frae; at least, if there's no' in Edinbro, there's plenty in Thornhill. It may happen, though, that ye're ower parteecular, or it may be ye're lookin' oot for yin wi' a towsy tocher. Ministers an' lawyers, they tell me, ha'e a wonderfu' penetration in sniffin' oot siller, an' the faculty o' placin' their he'rt where the handy lies.'

'That may be, Betty; but I must be an exception to this rule among lawyers, for I can assure you monetary considerations would never influence me. More than that, Betty,

I don't consider my case altogether hopeless, although I am nearly thirty. There's luck in leisure, and you mustn't forget that you can't command love. It has to come of its own free-will—unasked, as it were; and when it comes, rest assured it won't be a case of pounds, shillings, and pence with me. The fact is, Betty, I'm waiting.'

'Faith, ye're richt there; an' let me tell ye this, Maister Weelum, if ye wait much langer ye'll be gray-heided.'

'Yes, yes, Betty; but I mean I'm waiting for a particular young lady.'

'Oh, I see! Then ye ken o' yin?'

'Well, yes'——

'An' ye're waitin' on her growin' up, watchin' her as ye wad watch a Newton pippin ripenin'?'

'No, no! Betty, you misunderstand me. I know of a young lady; but—well, the truth is, I haven't met her yet—at least not in the flesh. Now, now, Betty, don't laugh at me till I explain.'

'Oh, Maister Weelum! I'll no' laugh. It strikes me it's mair a matter o' greetin'. But never mind; ca' your gird.'

'Well, Betty, to make a long story short, a few years ago I had a dream, and in that dream I saw a face and heard a voice—a

woman's face and a woman's voice. I was very much impressed at the time, and that face has haunted me ever since. Among my friends I am not considered, in the generally accepted sense of the term, a woman's man. Strenuous work, facing hard matter-of-fact events, glimpses into the matrimonial tragedies of not a few lives, and the toll in time and thought which a growing business exacts have to an extent blighted the growth of the sentimentality which usually creeps into a man's heart between twenty and thirty. Somehow I have allowed matters to drift—to shape their own ends, or, as you would say, to work out their own salvation—in the full assurance, however, and with the hope strong within me, that some day the lady of my dream will come into my life, that I will again see that face and hear that voice. So far I have waited in vain; but I am not discouraged, for I feel my fate lies in my dream, and, as I say, I am waiting still.'

Betty resumed her knitting, for her needles had been idle while I was speaking.

'Imphm!' she said at length; 'an' that's hoo the land lies! Fancy that noo, a great, big, wiselike man like you hankerin' after the face o' a woman ye had seen when ye were sleepin', an' a' the time withoot a doot lettin'

chances slip by ye o' catchin' what ye micht ha'e gruppit. Hoots! hoots! Maister Weelum, that 's surely a senseless ploy. Mair than that, I 've nae brew o' dreams, although I confess that there 's much in Scripture hinges on them. They were the makin' o' Joseph, a loupin'-on-stane to Daniel, an' a godsend to the prophets on mair than ae occasion. There 's nae gettin' away frae it; but for a' that, as I say, I 've nae brew o' them. I mind aince o' dreamin' that I was sittin' doon to my tea, an' that I was eatin' the best bit o' boiled ham that ever I tasted in a' my life; an' the next mornin'—the very next mornin', Maister Weelum—my soo dee'd. Anither time—it was on a Setter-day nicht, I mind—I dreamed that the kitchen lum was on fire; an' on the Sunday mornin', when I keekit up to see that it was a' richt, a young doo tummelt doon an' nearly frichtened the life oot o' me. An' there was Peggy Rae —Mrs Wallace, ye ken—a real nice, God-fearin' woman she is, an' a regular attender o' the prayer meetin's—weel, three times in ae nicht she dreamed that an auld auntie o' hers had come hame frae Ameriky an' gi'en her the present o' three hunner pounds; an' what think ye, Maister Weelum, she wasna weel through wi' her breakfast when her mither-in-law—an auld, Godless, totterin' heathen she was—was

brocht to her door in a cairt, took to her bed in Peggy's wee back-room, an' was the plague o' her life for weel on for a dizzen years. Na, na, Maister Weelum; dreams are queer, contrary, unchancy things to sweer by. Tak' my advice, forget a' aboot your dream-leddy, as ye ca' her; cast your e'e aboot on what ye can see an' grup, an', losh me! a faceable-lookin' man like you needna grapple lang. But I 'm daft, sittin' clatterin' here an' the tatties at the sypein'. Tak' tent o' what I say, though, Maister Weelum, for ye 're nearin' that time o' life when an unmarried man stammers into a rut that he 's no' easy got oot o'.'

Betty's warning gave me food for reflection for long after she left me—so much so, indeed, that as I quietly strolled along the Cundy road an hour or two afterwards, in the early afternoon, every chaffinch sang not *to* me but *at* me, and the burden of his song seemed to be, 'Tak' tent, tak' tent, and mind, do mind, the rut, rut, rut.'

In the sunshine too, amid nature in all its reality and activity, dreams and visions seemed strangely far away and unimportant. In my little room, with all its haunting associations, the story of my dream-lady had a becoming setting and an uncommonly substantial foundation. But here, with the breeze playing among

the shimmering leaves of the gnarled poplars, the merry song of the birds in the plantation, and the sunshine lying on the white parallel-tracked road, it seemed more of an illusion, something very unreal and fanciful, and I actually blushed that I, a solid, stolid man of thirty, should have narrated such a story with so much gravity, and pinned to it a significance so personal and material.

Absorbed in thought, I ambled along, heedless alike of time or distance, until at length, with surprise at my strength and staying-power, I noted that I had walked almost to the Nithbank Wood. I felt neither tired nor inconvenienced; and when I considered that I had been only a month or two under Dr Grierson's care, I felt I had accomplished a very wonderful feat indeed. True, I had rested all the forenoon, and even now I was heavily supporting myself on two stout hazel staffs; yet never since my accident had I walked so far without fatigue, and I felt relieved and elated beyond words.

I halted for a little in the grateful shade of a spreading lime, feasting my eyes on scenery dear and familiar to me since boyhood—the little round wood at the Cundy foot, every tree in which I had climbed in quest of young squirrels; the clump of geans at Holmhill,

whose wild purple-brown fruit was sweeter far than any coddled garden cherries; the sweep of the Nith at the Ellers, where I had so often 'dooked' and fished; and the mossy, wild-thyme carpeted 'howmes'—our playground of long ago. The murmuring Nith recalled to me the Auld Gillfit, with its gray-blue pebbled beach and its banks of upstanding raspberry-bushes and twisting, prickly brambles, and with extraordinary intensity the desire sprang up within me to view its charms once more.

Buoyed up by pleasurable anticipations, forgetful of my weakness and the uneven, rutted slope, I opened the little wicket, and, without misgiving, entered the wood.

Through the green, quivering foliage I caught glimpses here and there of rippling, dancing wavelets, nodding brown-headed segg grasses, and patches of shimmering, sunlit sands. With eyes strained to catch each well-known feature, I stumblingly descended the rugged bank, and very soon, more by luck than careful guidance, I reached my goal. A hedge of waving willows screened from me the Cundy stream; but its joyous rhythmic ripple, as it washed its sandy, pebbled bed, sounded in my ear like the crooning song my mother used to sing when I lay on her knee as a child.

This was the dear old spot, the bank where

we lay after our 'dook,' baking our naked bodies in the sun's warm rays; here the little sandy isle where we played at pirates and castaways, cooking a guddled yellow trout over a 'smeeky' green-wood fire, and washing it down with lukewarm water from the stream; there, through the arches' span, the Doctor's Tarn, where the grayling used to lie; and, away beyond, the quiet grassy uplands of the Keir and the gray-green hills of Glencairn fading into the horizon.

Seating myself on the sun-browned turf, I lit my pipe. How long I sat I cannot say, for I was lost in reverie, and, truth to tell, just a little fatigued by my unusual exertions. Suddenly, however, it came to me that I wasn't alone. This fact was first proclaimed by a curling wreath of smoke on the other side of the willows. Then the aroma of a well-seasoned havana greeted my nostrils, and I rose to my feet to reconnoitre.

Walking a little upstream, I came to an opening in the willow-hedge, and there, on a sand-knoll at the foot of the bank, sat a man—a clergyman, judging by his dress; while a little in front of him, and almost on the water's edge, was a tall young lady standing before an easel. I saw the man in profile—elderly and gray-bearded he was; but the lady's back was

turned to me, and she was much engrossed with her canvas.

I must have walked very noiselessly, as neither of them seemed aware of my presence; and this I counted strange, since I had made no attempt at stealthiness, and they were so near me that I could almost have touched them. I stood for a minute silent and undecided whether or not to make my presence known.

Before I could make up my mind, the artist ceased work, and, stepping a few feet to her right, studied the effect from the altered standpoint. This gave me the much-desired opportunity of seeing the picture, and I noted with peculiar pleasure that it was part of the view in which I had just been revelling. And the subject, difficult and ideal though it was, had been touched by no unworthy, amateurish hand. The old red-sandstone bridge, mellowed in a soft western light, was a centre round which much broad, skilful, loving work was evidenced. Oil was her medium—rather an unusual one, I thought, for a lady; and in the brief glance I got I noticed she had imparted to her canvas the true atmosphere, and that it contained in colour, drawing, and composition the essentials of really good work.

Her clergyman companion closed his book,

relit his cigar, and consulted his watch. 'Much as I expect of this picture as a big draw at my bazaar, and anxious as I am to take it back with me to-morrow to Laurieston, I 'm afraid I must call you to a halt. It 's almost five o'clock.'

'Just one wee, wee minute,' the artist pleaded in a singularly sweet voice, which seemed to me far away, yet strangely familiar.

A few deft, bold touches, the while her small head critically swayed from one side to the other.

'Finis! finis!' she called at length; 'and I 'm sorry to part with it, as I love this subject.'

With a face flushed with success, she turned to her companion. Then her eyes met mine, and I stood breathless and transfixed, for I had heard the voice, and was looking into the face, of my dream-lady!

The fact that I was in the presence of one who had mysteriously influenced me for the last ten years, one whom I had seen in my dreams but never met, thrilled me through and through, and I felt bewildered and benumbed. Had I been in normal health, doubtless I should have boldly faced a situation so psychologically strange and alluring; but in my present enfeebled condition I had no

craving for the occult and romantic, and when I was freed from the spell of my dream-lady's eyes my first impulse was to retrace my steps and immediately regain the highroad.

I turned at once, in my haste struck my heel against one of my staffs, and fell heavily on the sloping pathway. My tweed hat fell from my head and rolled away down the bank, but I made no effort to recover it. With extreme difficulty I rose to my feet, and, gripping my two staffs in a strong grasp, started again to reach the crest of the wooded brow.

One of the peculiar effects of my accident is that I cannot raise my body on my toes. When going upstairs I have to turn sideways, and in an awkward, laboured fashion lift one foot over the other; and in negotiating this ascent, in which the same muscles were called into action, I had to take a zigzag course which demanded great caution and care, as there was no pathway, and the surface was treacherous and uneven.

I stood for a moment before I entered on my arduous undertaking, irresolute and hesitating, swayed by two conflicting impulses. Here was the fulfilment of my dream. Down there, a little beyond the hedge of willows, stood one the memory of whose sweet, pensive face had haunted me for years; whose living presence I

had prayed for, yearned for; and whose influence, unconsciously exerted, had dominated my being and kept me unscathed in the midst of many temptations. It was the culmination of ten years' expectancy and waiting. A series of remarkable coincidences and strange providential workings had matured, and here was I spurning a friendly interposition of the Fates, and fleeing away as if I were a cowardly, shamefaced culprit. Why should I act so? Why should I not face the situation and await this flow in the tide of my affairs?

Then in thought I traversed the long, dreary road which during the past years I had walked alone. Hastily I reviewed the picture I had often conjured up of what our meeting would be, the contemplation of which had yielded me so much sacred, secret pleasure. Strange, I had always painted her as I had seen her a minute ago, even to the detail of pose and attitude. She—well, she was just my dream-lady, faithful in every respect to my imaginings; and in this picture, in response to her inviting smile of recognition, I was by her side, strong in body, resolute of will, sure of having at last met my affinity.

Strong in body! Resolute of will! Was I? Ah, the humiliation of the truth! Why, as I stood there, I was tottering on my feet

like an octogenarian, convulsively clutching two hazel staffs for support, and so irresolute that I could scarce form an idea of what my next move would be. What a metamorphosis! what a pitiful spectacle!—an object surely for sympathy, but not likely to inspire love or admiration. No, no, she must not see me thus; and, quickly disposing of all other considerations, I turned my back upon fate and commenced the ascent.

Painfully I dragged myself along. Never once did I look backward, for I soon found that I had essayed a task requiring all my concentrated attention. Urged on by a consuming desire to get away, I at first made wonderful progress. But as the minutes passed, and the ascent became steeper, I felt my will-power diminishing, my strength gradually growing less, and my knack of happily negotiating ruts and obstacles deserting me at every step. Once I lost my balance and slipped down the slope; but I clutched the dried tufted grass with a frenzied hand, and crawled up on my knees to where my hazel had dropped. Again I started, and again I fell, this time losing grip of both my staffs and also any confidence in myself that was left. Flushed and breathless, I rose to my knees, and with feverish energy began to crawl uphill.

But my haste was my undoing, for with it my caution disappeared. Twice the wisps of grass by which I hauled myself broke in my hand, and I slipped down, each time losing any little headway I had made. Again I slipped. Then despair took hold of me, and, with limbs exhausted and relaxed, and eyes moistened by thoughts of weakness and acknowledged defeat, I sank to the ground.

For a few minutes I lay oblivious to everything around me. Then the sound of approaching footsteps and snatches of faintly audible conversation recalled me; and wearily and painfully I raised myself to a half-reclining, half-sitting position, with my back turned to the direction whence the sounds proceeded.

'Yes, it's a very decent hat,' said a voice which I recognised as that of the clergyman; 'a very decent, serviceable hat indeed; and I dare say it may as well be restored to its owner, though the drunken scamp deserves little consideration.'

'Oh, surely he's not drunk, Mr Edmondstone?'

'Most assuredly he is,' replied the cleric. 'While you were busy on your canvas he was doubtless lying somewhere hereabouts, sleeping off the effects. Believe me, no man would stagger about a braeface as he

did unless he were under the influence of drink.'

'Dearie me, Mr Edmondstone! dearie me! are you not forgetting? Faith, Hope, Charity; and the greatest of these is Charity. Charity of judgment is beautiful, Mr Edmondstone. You are—or at least you should be—preaching that every Sunday. But in this case, whatever *you* presume, I, at all events, will maintain it was no drunken look he gave me. I admit his movements were suspicious; but—well, we'll soon find out. Please hand me his hat.'

'What! You surely don't mean to tell me you are going to speak to him?'

'Certainly. Why shouldn't I? Either you or I shall have to give him his hat; and—— Sh! sh! I'm afraid he's hearing all we are saying.'

My dream-lady was quite right. I hadn't missed a single word that had passed; and—passive, but with the hot blood mounting my neck and cheek—I had without protest allowed the charge of drunkenness to be made against me. I felt too weak and humiliated to make any defence. What mattered it to me, after all, what they thought, so long as they kept at a distance from me and left me to my own resources? They might have passed me, and I

would have made no sign that I was aware of their presence; but when I heard my dream-lady's decision to be the bearer of my old tweed hat I started violently and looked keenly toward her. With my chin resting on my tired, lacerated hands, I watched her carefully picking her steps along the tangled incline. The fact that there was no escaping an interview was borne home to me so forcibly that it led to speedy resignation, which not only relieved my pent-up feelings, but also enabled me to observe her dispassionately, and stud without bias, her face and form. What my estimate was I cannot tell, or, rather, I will not tell; but when she reached me, with a flushed face, a half-frightened, half-defiant look in her eye, and my old tweed hat in her hand, I felt she had been aware of my critical scrutiny and resented it, although my opinion, favourable or otherwise, was to her of no consequence whatever.

'Thank you very much for bringing my hat to me,' I said awkwardly; 'and thank you still more for your belief in my sobriety.'

She looked at me for a minute, the while all evidence of fear or distrust vanished from her face. Then she smiled—smiled a true smile, with parted lips that disclosed two rows of pearly teeth, and soft fringed eyes that showed

in their depths trust in humanity and joy of life.

'Oh, please don't thank me for either,' she said, in a low, sweet-toned voice. 'Your hat is too good to lose. It is no trouble to return it; and as for the other—eh—matter—well' —and she looked round about her on the russet woods, the peaceful fields, and away to the west where the faint sunset glow was suffused along the Glencairn hills—'I could not bring my mind to associate such glories as these with any state so mean and degrading; and I'm glad—yes, I'm glad—that I was right.'

I bowed in silent gratitude.

'I don't want to appear inquisitive,' she continued; 'but would you mind telling me why you acted so peculiarly in zigzagging up this incline instead of taking the path by the boundary beech-hedge? And, oh dear, dear! your hands are bleeding! Have you no handkerchief? See, here is one;' and she pleadingly held out a dainty piece of lace cambric which I could easily have put inside my watch-case.

Refusing her kind offer with thanks, I produced a sonsy specimen of Betty's laundry-work, which I rolled round my right-hand thumb. 'It is more than kind of you to interest yourself in a stranger,' I said without

looking up. 'The fact is, I haven't been feeling very fit lately. The effects of a nasty accident have kept me too much indoors; but to-day, feeling a little stronger than usual, I extended my walk, and very foolishly determined to visit a particular spot here which, through boyish associations, is very dear to me. As it happened, I found you occupying it; and not wishing to disturb you in your work, and eager to regain the highway, I overexerted myself, lost my footing, my patience, courage, and my two sticks, and—and here I am! But I've got my second wind now. I'll rest here just a little longer, and everything will be all right.'

'Dearie me,' she said, and she caught a straying tress of dark hair and tucked it securely underneath her tam-o'-shanter, 'how very easily one may be deceived by appearances! Mr Edmondstone thought you were—well, you know; and I thought you had seen a ghost. I'm very sorry to know of your illness, and it is lucky, after all, that we were about. If you feel sufficiently rested, my friend and I will assist you up to the wicket.'

She offered her good services with such an ingratiating, confident air, anticipating neither denial nor protest, that I was downright sorry to say her nay.

'No, no,' I said nervously, and I am afraid ungraciously; 'I shall manage all right by myself. Thank you all the same. But there is one kind action you might do on my behalf. Down there, below that little knoll, and somewhere in the long grass, are my two hazels. I—I lost grip of them somehow. They rolled down, and I couldn't very well reach them again. Once I have them in my hands I'll feel myself again. Would you mind getting them for me?'

'Certainly,' she said with alacrity; and, slip-sliding down the few yards of irregular turf, she soon returned with my hazels. 'Are you quite sure now that I can be of no further service to you?' she asked, as she handed them to me.

God knows there was much she could do for me, and I yearned to tell her so; but I felt her presence beginning to dominate me; and as I was strangely out of humour with myself, and utterly incapable of acting the part I had in my day-dreams anticipated, I made haste to call up what remnant of will-power I had left.

'You have been exceedingly kind to me, a stranger,' I stammered. 'Believe me, I appreciate what you have done, and—good-afternoon.' And in confusion I raised my hat.

She looked inquiringly at me for a moment, and I saw speech trembling on her lip; but with a little effort she checked it. Then, with a smile and a slight inclination of her head, she walked slowly, and I imagined thoughtfully, toward her companion. I heard the wicket opening on its creaking hinges, and clicking as it closed in its iron fastening. Voices in animated conversation became fainter and fainter, rhythmic sounds of footsteps died away into silence, and I lay back on the bank among the brown wispy grass and the red autumn leaves with a joy and thankfulness in my heart I had never experienced before. And my joy was not born of the knowledge that my dream lady was a reality. Somehow, I had never doubted that. Rather was it that I had convinced myself that she possessed all the virtues and qualities with which I had vested her; and that, short as our interview had been, and commonplace as our conversation had proved, there was pervading it all the feeling, peculiar and indefinable, that what had taken place was merely a prelude to something more satisfying, a foretaste of greater happiness in store. What mattered it that I didn't know her name or where she had gone? Sufficient to me to know I was being guided aright, that the Fates were with me, and that

by degrees the curtain would be drawn aside and my way made clear.

The birds trilled sweetly the last lingering notes of their lullaby, the Cundy stream crooned lovingly a song I had never heard before, and the glamour of the gloaming took possession of my soul.

CHAPTER VI.

FOR the past three days I have been confined to my bedroom, indeed I may say to my bed; for, with the exception of a short half-hour to-day—when Betty exchanged blankets for sheets—I have been reluctantly compelled to restrict my range of vision to the interior of my room, with my head on my pillow. The doctor has been to see me morning and night, and Betty has been in and out and out and in, and her anxiety regarding me has been too evident to be ignored.

This morning, when she had accompanied the doctor downstairs, I heard her ask what he thought of me. I didn't hear what he said in reply, because his voice is very low-pitched and his articulation not distinct; but Betty's rejoinder was, 'Imphm! I juist expected something o' the kind. Dod, doctor, was it no' a stupid ploy—sic thochtless stravaigin'—five oors oot o' the hoose in snell weather like this, an' him as shaky on his legs as a footrule? A wean o' ten years auld wad ha'e haen mair sense.'

No reproaches have been made to my face,

however, and of this I am glad, as I am sure I should be sorely exercised in mind to find a suitable excuse for my truancy.

I am not very clear about the details of my journey homeward from the Nithbank Wood. Betty and Nathan were both out when I returned, doubtless making search for me; and as I was too fatigued to walk upstairs, I sat down in Nathan's easy-chair in the kitchen and fell asleep. I have no recollection of what followed; and, considering the state of Betty's pent-up feelings, it would, I feel, be rather imprudent of me to ask.

I have been feeling rather low in spirits these last two days. I cannot blame the weather, for the October sun, though waning in strength, is showing his face for long-continued spells, the air is brisk and invigorating, and the sparrows are chirping and sporting in the eaves above my little window as if it were the merry month of May. I am loath to attribute this depression to physical weakness; yet were I to make such acknowledgment to Dr Grierson, I know he would frankly and at once confirm it. That I have received a set-back is evident, and when I call to mind my exertions in the plantation I need not be surprised. Still, everything considered, if I had that afternoon to live over again I should

do just exactly as I did then. I am truly sorry if what Betty calls my 'thochtless stravaigin'' has undone the doctor's work, sorry if Betty's loving care has been lavished in vain. But Time, with healing in his wings, will surely make everything right again. And then I must not forget that but for this 'thochtless stravaigin'' I should not have met my dream-lady face to face. Ah! this is the one consoling fact, a rich reward, though the penalty I pay may be great. It is the only bright spot in a drab, dreary outlook, and I shall nurse this secret joy in my heart, and count myself favoured indeed.

Betty, who has a jealous eye where I am concerned, has noticed my depression. Yesterday and to-day she has given me much of her company, and in our cracks she has done her utmost to divert my mind into agreeable channels. She talked much of a younger brother of Nathan's—Joe, a member of the Hebron family I had not heard of before. Joe, it turns out, is an old soldier, and on a slender pension, eked out by the proceeds of odd jobbing, he keeps up a modest one-roomed establishment somewhere in the purlieus of the Cuddy Lane. On the expiry of his army service he came to Thornhill—accompanied by a Cockney wife of whom Betty and Nathan had

no previous knowledge—with a view to settling down among the scenes of his boyhood, which had haunted his dreams in far-away lands. But the quiet village life had no charms for Mrs Joseph, and after a month of protesting in which rural life was damned, and pleading in which London's charms were extravagantly extolled, she went away south on a holiday, from which she never returned. Thanks to his army training, which had perfected him in the art of looking after number one, Joe took to housekeeping on his own as a duck takes to water, and settled down to a state of grass-widowerhood with astonishing equanimity. Regularly, however, during July, August, September, and part of October, he disappears from the village; and Betty thinks, but is not quite sure—as Joe, like Nathan, is very reticent—that Mrs Joe runs a small boarding-house down south somewhere, and that Joe goes to give her a hand during the busy months. Betty is expecting his return any day now, and I shall be glad to meet him, as his history has interested me. With such gossipy news, interspersed with naïve by-remarks, Betty has done her level best to drive dull care away.

This afternoon, when she left me to make ready Nathan's supper, she promised to come

back again with her knitting after the meal was over; but, finding her duties didn't permit of her immediately fulfilling her promise, she deputed Nathan to act the cheery host.

By very slow degrees Nathan is ridding himself of his reticence. When we meet he has more to say than formerly, and his long-drawn sighs instead of words are less frequent; but he has not yet ventured upstairs of his own free-will or without a message or excuse.

'There noo, Nathan,' I heard Betty say, after he had 'hoasted' satisfaction with his meal and scrieved his chair away from the table—'there noo, Nathan, gang away up like a man. Juist walk strecht into the room as if the hoose was your ain, an' for ony sake dinna gant an' sit quiet. The laddie 's dull an' wearyin', so keep the crack cheery.'

Nathan's appearance is not calculated to inspire gaiety. He is too long and 'boss-looking,' his whiskers are too straight and wispy, and his blue eyes too vacant and far-away. But, as I have admitted, there is a 'composure' about him which is satisfying; and as he pushed my door ajar and came in, as it were bit by bit, I gladly laid aside my book and turned down my lamp.

I presumed he would be dying for his after-supper smoke, so I persuaded him to sit down

in the basket chair at the foot of my bed, and 'fire his pipe,' as he terms it.

For a time he smoked in silence; then, suddenly remembering Betty's injunction, and looking through the uncurtained window and taking a long survey of the scudding clouds, he said, 'Imphm! the wind 's changin', Maister Weelum, to the nor'-east. That means a bla' doon your lum, I 'm thinkin', an' it 's a maist by-ordinar' dirty, choky thing, is back reek.' Then breaking away at a tangent, and fixing his blue eyes on me, he said, 'Ay, man, an' ye 're no' lookin' sae weel the nicht as I 've seen ye.'

'Maybe not, Nathan,' I said. 'I haven't been up to the mark yesterday and to-day.'

'So Betty was tellin' me; but—eh—ye 're lookin' waur than I expectit.'

'I 'm sorry, Nathan,' and I laughed uneasily; 'but, you know, I cannot help my appearance.'

'No, Maister Weelum, that 's true—that *is* true;' and he deliberately, and with unerring aim, spat in the fire. 'Nae man can—phew!—eh, losh, d' ye see that?' he hastily ejaculated, as a cloud of smoke spued from the fireplace, swirled up the wall, and spread along the ceiling. 'I telt ye the wind was shiftin' its airt, an' that ye wad ha'e a bla' doon. If there 's onything in this world I hate, it 's

back smoke. Man, it seeps doon through your thrapple into your lungs, an' there 's nae hoastin' o' it up. Phew!—dash it! I wonder when that lum was last soopit. Talkin' o' lums, did ye ken that auld Brushie the sweep was buried the day?'

Not having had the pleasure of Brushie's acquaintance, I replied in the negative with unconcern.

'Ay,' continued Nathan, determined to obey Betty and keep the crack going—'ay, there 's a lot o' folk slippin' away the noo; changeable weather gethers them in. It 's a kittle time o' the year for them that are no' very strong—imphm!'

I was, unfortunately, in a more than usually susceptible state of mind, and the morbid strain of Nathan's conversation was affecting me in spite of myself. 'Yes, Nathan,' I said, expecting to bring a smile to his long, serious face, 'people are dying just now who never died before.'

'True, Maister Weelum; ye 're richt there. Imphm! ye 're perfectly richt,' he solemnly said without relaxing a muscle. He crossed his long legs very deliberately and stroked his beard as he looked round my little room. 'Man, Maister Weelum, dootless ye think ye 're as snug up here as a flea in a blanket,

but wad ye no' be better doon the stairs in the big bedroom to the sooth, an'—an'——

'And what, Nathan?'

'Oh, weel, it's no' for the likes o' me to dictate to you. Ye ken your ain ken best, but wad ye no' be mair comfortable-like sleepin' in the sooth room an' sittin' your odd time in the dinin'-room? Betty or me never put a foot in it except to air or fire it, an' it wad save ye the trouble an' inconvenience o' comin' up an' doon the stairs.'

I thought for a moment before replying to this unexpected and most sensible suggestion.

'Is this idea off your own bat, Nathan?' I asked.

'Off my ain what, Maister Weelum?'

'I mean, did you think out this arrangement yourself, or is it Betty's idea and yours?'

'Oh, I see. Weel—imphm-m!—we were talkin' it ower atween us last nicht, an' Betty thinks ye wad be better doon the stairs; but she doesna like to say that to ye for fear ye micht think that ye were a bother to her, or that she considered hersel' ill hauden takin' your meat up to ye, an'—an' things like that—ye see.'

'I understand,' I said thoughtfully; 'and do you know, Nathan, the idea is worth considering, and'——

'No' to interrupt ye, Maister Weelum,' he interposed, 'ye ken as weel as I do ye're far frae bein' strong—at least, as strong as ye should be. Ye're nocht the better o' that lang walk ye had the ither day, an' the doctor's no' sae pleased wi' ye as he was.'

'Oh, indeed, Nathan! I'm sorry to know that; but, with care and a few days' rest, I trust to be all right very soon.'

'Oh, dod, sir, we a' hope that—imphm!—but, a' the same, if I were you I wad shift my quarters. Ye'll ha'e mair convenience, a sooth exposure, langer sunshine, nae back smoke, an' then, man, ye'll be nearer Betty should ye need her service. I've aye considered this a wee, poky place onyway; an' as for the stair up to't, it's the warst-planned yin I ever saw. It's far ower narra, the turn's ower sherp, an' it wad be a perfect deevil o' a job to get a kist doon there.'

'A what, Nathan?' I asked.

'A kist—a coffin, I mean.'

'But, goodness me, my good man, who wants to take a coffin down there?'

'Oh Lord! naebody that I ken o', Maister Weelum—no, no, naebody I ken o'. But yin's never sure. As Betty often says, "oor days are as gress"—imphm! We drap awa' like the leaves in the back-end, Maister Weelum—

ay, juist like leaves nippit wi' the frost. An', speakin' o' leaves, I was workin' amang leaf-mould the day; an', dod, sir, it 's a queer thing, but, d' ye ken, whenever I handle that stuff I begin to think aboot kirkyairds. Isn't that a queer thing noo, Maister Weelum?' and he puffed at his pipe without drawing smoke.

My lamp was burning low. Rain was pattering on the darkened window-panes, and the soughing wind at irregular intervals drove clouds of smoke down my chimney. Shadows from the lime-tree danced on the white-washed walls, taking to themselves grotesque fantastic shapes; and Nathan—gaunt, wispy-bearded, spectral Nathan—puffed, and sighed, and spat in the semi-darkness. From the kitchen downstairs came to me at times sounds of a conversation carried on in a dull monotone, and interspersed with half-suppressed distressing sobs. A queer, creepy sensation began to take hold of me. I drew my blankets tighter round me and settled my pillow a little higher.

CHAPTER VII.

NATHAN noted my movements. 'Can I help ye, Maister Weelum, or is there ocht I can do to mak' ye comfortable? Betty 'll no' be lang till she 's wi' ye. She 's busy the noo, an' she sent me up to keep ye cheery till her wark was dune.'

I looked at him and saw he was quite serious, so I concluded that, decent, well-meaning man though he was, he was no humorist.

'Ay, Nathan,' I said, after I had thought over the situation, 'I have no doubt your intentions are all right. Invalids ought to be kept cheery, as you call it; but'——

'Ye admit, then, that ye *are* an invalid, Maister Weelum?'

'Well, Nathan, I 'm afraid I must admit that.'

'Ay, man—imphm! so far, so guid. Ye ken, sir, there *are* some fouk that 'll no' gi'e in when ocht ails them. There was Cairneyheid, for instance. Did ye ken him? No—imphm! it doesna maitter. Weel, Cairnie, as we ca'd him for short, had farmed on the Alton rig a' his days. The rig lies high, an' there 's aye plenty o' guid fresh air up yonder, and Cairnie

never in his life had had even a sair heid. But, dod, sir, ae day, after his denner, he quately slippit to the flaer, an' couldna get up again. Weel, he sat there till aboot hauf six withoot sayin' a single damn, an' if ye kenned Cairnie an' his weys ye could understaun that that gied his women-fouk a glauff. Weel, suddenly he lookit up an' asked for a gless o' whisky, an' they thocht frae that that he was better. He did kind o' revive after his dram, an' wi' nae sma' trauchle they got him to his bed. Next mornin' he was dreich o' risin', an' when he got to his breakfast he couldna eat, an' still he didna sweer, so they sent awa' doon for the doctor. Weel, whenever the doctor cam' an' saw him he ordered him at aince to be put in his bed. "Bed!" said Cairnie. "Bed in the guid daylicht! I think I see mysel'! I never in a' my life gaed to my bed except at nicht an' to sleep, an' I 'm no' gaun the noo;" an' he got up oot o' his chair in spite o' them. "I 'm awa' up to the high field to see hoo they 're gettin' on wi' the turnip-shawin'," he said; an' withoot dug or stick he oot o' the hoose. Hooever he got the length o' the field guidness only kens, but there he got. "Hurry on, men," he said; "dinna be feart to bend your backs in guid shawin' weather like this. The pits 'll a' be

ready afore ye're ready for them;" an' he lifted a knife to gi'e them a haun. He pu'd a turnip, an' was juist gaun to whang off the shaw, when doon he drappit in the middle o' the drill as deid as Abel.'

Nathan relit his pipe, which had gone out during the narrative. 'Ay,' he continued, as he puffed audibly, 'it was a very big funeral, was Cairnie's. He was buried in Dalgarnock —a damp, douth place to lie in, in my estimation. No' that it maitters muckle, I daur say; but still'——

'Whae's this ye're on, Nathan?' said Betty, who had entered the room unobserved.

'Oh, naebody parteeklar, Betty. I'm juist ca'in' the crack as ye telt me, an' keepin' Maister Weelum here cheery till ye come up;' and he rose, with a sigh of relief, from his chair, sidled toward the door, and went cautiously downstairs.

When I heard him safely round the 'sherp' turn on the staircase I looked at the sonsie, kindly face of my old nurse. 'Oh my dear Betty, I am glad to see you!' I said with fervour.

'Hoo's that, noo, Maister Weelum?' and she gave a wee bit pleased laugh. 'Ha'e ye been missin' me? Has Nathan no' been ca'in' the crack?'

'Yes, Betty, I have been missing you, and Nathan *has* been ca'in' the crack; but, Betty' —and I lowered my voice—'he 's been in kirk-yards all the time.'

'Ah, is that so?' she sympathetically asked. 'I 'm sorry, noo, to ken that. He must ha'e been workin' among leaf-mould the day.'

'He was, Betty; he told me so.'

'That accoonts for it, Maister Weelum. Nathan 's awfu' queer that wey; but, puir falla, he canna help it; an' then ye ken he means sae terribly weel. I 'm awfu' sorry, though, if his crack has depressed ye. Ye 're juist a wee bittie doon i' the mooth the noo, an' ye 'll be easily putten aboot; but keep your pecker up, like a guid laddie, an' ye 'll soon be better in health an' better in spirits. Efter a', an' when a' 's considered, ye 've a lot to be thankfu' for. Mony a yin wad gladly change places wi' ye. It 's a gey hard, step-motherly kind o' world this for some folk; but you—weel, I wad say ye 've your fu' share o' blessin's.'

I looked keenly toward her while she was speaking. 'You are perfectly right, my dear Betty,' I said. 'I have my full share of blessings, and every reason to be thankful and grateful. Why, Betty, when I think of it, it is a downright sin in me to allow myself to

become depressed. It would be much more to the purpose were I to bestir myself and do all I can to help others, whose share of the good things is less, and whose burdens are greater. By the way, Betty, were you crying downstairs about half-an-hour ago?'

'No, Maister Weelum, I was not cryin'.'

'Strange,' I said; 'I was sure I heard some one sobbing.'

Betty stooped down and poked the smoking coals into glowing flame. Then she pulled down my window-blind and drew the curtains together. 'Oh, you're quite richt; you dootless did hear greetin', but it wasna me;' and she sat down again and unrolled her knitting, but she didn't ply her needles.

'D'ye mind,' she continued after a long pause, 'you an' me speakin' aboot Tom Jardine the grocer, oor next-door neebor, ye ken?'

'Perfectly, Betty,' I replied; and at mention of his name I saw in my mind's eye a rain-swept courtyard, a haggard, worried face, and a golden-haired bairn. Intuitively I saw more —troubles, big mental troubles which crush the heart and soul out of a man. Oh! I hadn't forgotten.

'Weel,' she continued, a tremor in her voice, 'it was Tom Jardine's wife that was greetin' in the kitchen, an' I'm juist dyin' to speak to

you, for what she has telt me is lyin' at my he'rt like a stane. Are ye weel enough, think ye, to be bothered listenin'?'

'My dear Betty, where two old friends like you and Tom Jardine are concerned, nothing is, or can be, a bother; so proceed, if you please.'

She began to knit, then stopped and counted her stitches, while I filled and lit my pipe.

'Little mair than a week bygane,' she began, 'I was in Tom's shop for some odds and ends, and when he was servin' me, says he, "Mrs Hebron, I fully expected to be able to clear off ten pounds of that auld balance this back-end term; but I'm beginning to be feart that'll no' be possible." The balance he referred to, Maister Weelum, was thirty pounds—half o' the sixty Nathan an' me loaned his faither. Ye mind I telt ye aboot that?'

I nodded.

'"Weel, Tom," says I, she continued, '"that's a' richt. Don't fash your mind aboot that." "But, Mrs Hebron," says he, "I canna help worryin' aboot it. I'm very sorry indeed, an' I trust my no' payin' ye the noo will no' put ye aboot?" "Not in the slichtest, Tom," says I; "mak' your time my time. I ken what ye've set your face to do, an' I couldna wish ye better luck in your endeavour

if ye were my ain bairn." His he'rt filled, puir laddie, an' he thanked me, an' he began to tell me what a bother he had in gettin' in his money. He showed me twae accoonts, yin for fifty pounds an' anither for sixty-five, that have been lyin' oot for mair than a year. It seems that when he was in that big warehoose in Glesca he had some experience in the seed line, an', havin' a guid connection wi' groceries among the farmers roond aboot here, it struck him he could, wi' little mair expense, work the twae very profitably thegither. Weel, he started to do this, an' in the last twal'months he has selled an awfu' lot. But it appears that seed rins to money quickly, an' the twae accoonts ootlyin', an' aboot which he was so anxious, are, as it were, in this department. The want o' this money has keepit him very ticht, an' he 's been aff baith his meat an' his sleep ower the heid o't. Weel, to mak' a lang story short, the farmers ha'e baith failed. Tom got word yesterday, an', as it 's thocht they 're gey bad failures, an' very little ootcome expected, he 's nearly demented. He has gane ower his books, an' he sees he can pey twenty shillin's in the pound; but, to do that, it means handin' ower his stock, furniture, an' hoose, an' he 'll come oot o't wi' nocht but the claes on his back. His wife, puir lassie, was in the nicht tellin'

me a' aboot it. It was her ye heard greetin'. She has keepit a stoot he'rt an' a smilin' face to Tom; but whenever I put my haun kindly an' mitherly-like on her shooder she broke doon an' grat as if her he'rt was breakin', so I juist took the wee bundle o' spunk an' dejection in my airms, an' she had it a' oot there. Tom 's gaun up to the lawyer the morn to hand everything ower to him, an' Mrs Jardine and the bairns are leavin' Thornhill on Friday to stay wi' her mither till Tom gets wark somewhere. Noo, Maister Weelum, I want your advice, an' if ye chairge me sax an' eightpence for it I 'll—I 'll juist no' pey 't;' and a tear-drop broke from her eye as she smiled. She rose from her chair, laid aside her knitting, and coming over to my bedside, she put her hand on my arm. 'I 've still got the hunder pounds in the bank which your mother left to me, Maister Weelum,' she said. 'Nathan an' me ha'e saved fifty mair. I never had a bairn o' my ain, an' thae three wee curly-heided angels o' Tom's ha'e worked their wey into my he'rt, an' I juist canna let them away. D' ye think the mistress—your mother, I mean—wad ha'e me gi'in' the money in this way?'

I thought for a moment, and Betty watched me keenly. 'Am I to understand, Betty, that you are willing to step into the breach and

give Tom Jardine one hundred and fifty pounds —your all?'

'Yes—if ye think it wad be your mother's will.'

'Betty, if Nathan won't object, will you please put your arms round my neck and give me a kiss?' I said, and I raised my head from my pillow.

. . . . . .

The wind has died down, and through the lown midnight air I heard the Auld Kirk clock strike the hour of twelve. Tom Jardine has just left my room. He has been with me for almost three hours, and we have had a long smoke together and a grand talk over the times and folks of auld langsyne. Betty, as an interested party, favoured us with her company part of the time, for Nathan was sleeping the sleep of the just and the tired, and the kitchen fire had long gone out. She was surprised to know that Tom's difficulties could be overcome and his affairs straightened out without her little legacy and her hard-earned savings being requisitioned. Only Tom and I know how this was arranged, and as it is a little matter of personal interest to us, and us alone, the details of the transaction will remain untold.

I am having a run of strange coincidences

just now. When Betty was locking the door after Tom's departure I lifted my book to mark the page where I had left off on Nathan's coming into my room, and the paragraph opposite my thumb is as follows: 'I will pass through this world but once. If, therefore, there be any good thing I can do, or any kindness I can show, let me do it now. Let me not neglect it or defer it, for I shall never pass this way again.'

I shall read this to Betty to-morrow morning, and tell her that, though she may not have the faculty of thus beautifully and poetically expressing a sentiment, she lives it to the letter every day of her life.

CHAPTER VIII.

TO-DAY, when Betty was tidying my room, I took the opportunity of referring to Nathan's conversation of the previous evening, particularly that portion of it in which he advised me to take up my quarters downstairs. From the insinuating way in which he had introduced the subject, and the allusions he had made to my 'no weel' look, I naturally concluded that his advice might be interpreted as a hint to me that I was not so well as I fondly imagined; and that, for my own good, and for the convenience of my faithful old nurse—not to speak of obviating the necessity of taking a six-foot coffin down a narrow staircase with a sharp turn—I ought to agree to his proposal at once and without demur.

Betty now assures me, however, that if I am contented and comfortable in my own little room, she is quite satisfied. I am not for a moment to imagine that she advocates the change for the sake of saving her any trouble in attending on me. 'There's nae trouble where ye are concerned, Maister Weelum,' she

said. 'I look on ye amaist as my very ain bairn, an' I coont it a privilege to get waitin' hand an' foot on ye. It's a nice, easy stair to climb, it's handy for the kitchen, an' mair an' forby, it's no' as if ye'll aye be lyin' here. In a day or twae, or a week at maist, ye'll be up an' aboot again. A' the same, Maister Weelum, believe me when I say that ever sin' ye cam' to bide here I've thocht it a pity that ye didna use the dinin'-room. I understaun your likin' for this wee room. It was aye your very ain, an' mebbe a' richt to sleep in, though the sooth bedroom is bigger an' airier ; but it's juist no'—it's juist no' like a room that ye should ha'e your meat in, ye ken. When you're up an' aboot again ye'll mebbe think it ower.'

'Is the dining-room in good order, Betty?' I asked.

'It's juist as the mistress left it, Maister Weelum,' she said, with a catch in her voice. 'I've things covered to keep oot the dust, an' I've lifted an' cleaned, but juist aye replaced again. Nathan an' me are never in it, except to lift the winda on guid days to air it, or to pit a fire on noo an' again when the weather's damp. The kitchen an' oor back-room are guid enough for us, and we've juist, as it were, keepit the rest o' the hoose on trust. The

picters in your mother's wee drawin'-room are a' juist as they were, the piano-lid has never been lifted since she shut it, an' her auld china and other knick-knacks are as clean an' weel cared for as they were when she handled them hersel'. I've often gane up the stairs, ta'en a bit look in, an' come doon again a prood, prood woman that she considered me worthy to live amang it a', an' to tak' care o't.'

Betty and I have a community of interests in the long ago, a joint possession of memories which will ever be our dearest treasure. The links which bind us together were forged away back in the misty past; but time corrodes them not, and they are stronger to-day than ever they were before. To do her will was my sure pleasure, and so I began gracefully to waive, one by one, objections I had entertained, and to acquiesce with her and back up her arguments by referring to the coming wintry months, the comforts of the dining-room, its large, roomy fireplace, and the cheery, heartsome outlook the window commanded of the Cross and the Dry Gill.

'But, Betty,' I said, 'we'll have to do something to give it a more modern look. If I remember aright, the ceiling and cornice are very dark, and the wall-paper is a dismal green,

patched with a gold fleur-de-lis, and it has been on too long to be healthy.'

'Ay, weel, mebbe ye're richt; an' ye mentionin' wall-paper reminds me that the damp frae the gable has discoloured the end wa'. But the whitewashin' and paperin' o' ae room will no' be a big job, an' aince we gi'e the painter the order we'll no' ha'e lang to wait for him. His back-en' slackness is on noo. I saw him paintin' his ain doors and windas; an', as there's little chance o' him gettin' fat on that wark, he'll no' swither aboot gi'in' it up for what is likely to pey better. Imphm! Mebbe I should ha'e seen to this afore noo. The fact is, Maister Weelum, except for a few shillin's for paintin' the outside woodwark, I've spent no' a penny on paint or paper for the hoose since Nathan an' me were marrit. I should ha' had things in better order for ye; but, believe me, it was juist want o' thocht.'

'Nonsense, Betty; the whole house is in apple-pie order. There was no call for you to spend money on painting and papering, and I won't allow you to do that now. This is my little affair, Betty, and all I ask you to do is to see the painter and arrange for the work to be done as soon as possible.'

'Do you mean, Maister Weelum, that ye're to pey the whole thing?'

'Most certainly. So, my dear Betty, please say no more on that point, as my mind is made up and unalterable.'

'Weel, weel, sae be it. "Them that will to Cupar maun to Cupar." What kind o' a paper wad ye think o' puttin' on?'

Within my own mind I had decided on a nice warm buff canvas, but I refrained from giving my opinion. 'What do you think would be nice, Betty?'

Of old I remembered the garish colouring of the paper on her bedroom walls. Her taste in this was always a law unto the paper-hanger, and my mother used to shiver when she peeped in, and wondered how Betty could sleep peacefully in such a profusion of colour.

Betty pondered over my question for a moment. 'Mrs Black, the clogger's wife, got her parlour done up last spring, an' it looks juist beautifu'. The paper has a kind o' mauve gr'und wi' a gold stripe runnin' up, an' roon the stripe there 's a winkle-wankle o' nice big blue roses, an' a wee bit o' forget-me-not tied wi' a pink ribbon keeks oot here and there, juist as if it was hangin' in the air.'

'Blue roses are not natural, Betty.'

'No, so Nathan says; but they 're most by-ordinar' bonny, an' they 're hangin' roon this

gold stripe for a' the world as if they were newly blawn; an'—an' the leaves are a brisk green, an' the buds standin' oot abune the bloom as like as life, an' a' this beautifu' colourin' for a shillin' a piece! It was John Boyes the painter that put it on, an' he telt Mrs Black that there was only anither room like hers, an' it was in the Crystal Palace at London.'

'A shilling a piece, Betty!' I said, in astonishment, just for something to say. 'Oh, but I would give more than that!'

'Oh, then, ye'll juist get a' the mair gold an' roses for the extra money, Maister Weelum.'

'I am just wondering, Betty,' I said meditatively, 'if a wall-paper with roses—blue or otherwise—is the correct decoration for a dining-room.'

'Oh, there's nae rule, Maister Weelum—at least, no' in Thornhill. No, no; as lang as ye pey for the job, ye can put ony kind ye like on.' And she added, 'Wad ye no' leave the paper to the womenfolk, Maister Weelum? If ye do ye'll no' gang far wrang.'

'Yes, Betty, that's all right; but I don't know that I could eat my meals comfortably in a room among blue roses. How would a

nice, warm-coloured imitation of canvas look, without any pattern at all?'

'A warm-coloured imitation o' canvas? Imphm! I—I juist canna tak' that in; but if it's what I think it is, wad that no' look awfu' mealie-bag lookin'?'

'I'm sure it won't, Betty, and—and—well, I know it is the correct thing. Besides'——

'Ye will hark on "the correct thing," Maister Weelum. I've telt ye that whatever ye want, and pey for, is the correct thing in Thornhill. I've great faith in Mrs Black's taste. I aye tak' my cue, as it were, frae her, though I dinna tell her that; an', where colour is concerned, whether in papers or bonnets, I never think she's far wrang. She comes honestly by it. She aince telt me that it was bred in the bane, for her faither was a colourin'-man in a waxcloth factory aboot Kirkcaldy.'

Mrs Black's hereditary claim did not appeal to me, and in a most agreeable and ingratiating way I was advocating my own scheme, when the outer door opened.

'That'll be the doctor, I'm thinkin',' said Betty, and she hurried off downstairs to receive him.

As my acquaintance with Dr Grierson ripens my admiration for him increases, and my regret becomes all the keener that I had no know-

ledge of him in my boyhood. An early impression of any one, the outcome of youthful intimacy, is ever a sure basis on which to found true friendship, and I somehow imagine that, to a thoughtful, observant boy, such as Betty assures me I was, he would have been not only a willing, sympathetic preceptor, but also a great power for good in many ways. I have known him now for only a few months; but during these quiet, uneventful days of convalescence I have had opportunities of studying him well, and have noted with peculiar pleasure his love of nature in all its phases, his reverence for everything uplifting and elevating, and his sympathy, deep and profound, for all in suffering and distress.

Yesterday, when I was in the dumps, seeing everything as through a glass darkly, and feeling isolated and bereft of sympathetic, intelligent companionship, those lovable traits of his stood out vividly, and the thought came to me that I should tell him of the lady of my dream, and of our strange meeting in the Nithbank Wood. Betty, I know, ought to be my confidante; but I have the feeling that her experience is too limited and her outlook on life generally too parochial to admit of a well-reasoned, dispassionate view of my case; and, though yesterday and to-day I have had

ample opportunities of opening my heart to her, I have felt restrained and dissuaded. Some day I shall tell her everything, and I know she will rejoice with me. But the time is not yet.

CHAPTER IX.

WHEN Dr Grierson sat down at my bedside this morning and took my wrist between his sensitive finger and thumb, I felt magnetically drawn to him, and the desire to confide in him became irresistible. I had been wondering in my mind for hours how best I could introduce the subject; and, not hitting readily on a fitting opening, I had left it to chance and circumstance. Strangely enough, it was he who paved the way for me. After we had talked briefly on general subjects, he referred to my 'temporary breakdown,' as he termed it, and told me he was quite sure I had undergone a sudden mental strain which had adversely affected me physically; but that, once my mind and body were sufficiently rested, I should be quite all right again.

'You 're quite right, doctor, in your diagnosis of my case,' I said. 'I have had rather a queer experience lately, and, if you care to hear about it I shall gladly tell you. Would you share a little secret with me, doctor?'

'Most gladly,' he said.

'Well, will you please light your pipe? Take that easy-chair by the fire, and you may

sit with your back to me, and I sha'n't feel slighted.'

He laughed softly, and, extracting a short clay pipe from his waistcoat pocket, took the chair I indicated. Seated thus, and smoking steadily, he listened in silence till my story was finished. I gave him the whole history, kept nothing back; and in telling all the details I never hesitated, for the incidents were fresh in my mind, and I had everything well thought out.

'Ay, Mr Russell,' he said, after a long pause, 'you tell a story very well, and what you have told is most interesting and wonderful. I have read of such occurrences, but I haven't till now come across one at first hand, as it were. Shakespeare says there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy, and your experience certainly goes to prove it. It is usual, especially during a man's romantic years, to dream of a fair lady's face—very usual indeed; but I consider it most remarkable that everything came to a head so shortly after you had told Betty of your dream, and also when, for the first time, you had entertained doubts as to your vision being realised. I suppose you are very much in love with this lady?' and he looked over his shoulder at me.

'Well, yes, doctor, I am.'

'What is your age, again, Mr Russell?'

'Thirty in January.'

'And—and, you've never been in love before?'

'I think I've been in love ever since I dreamed my dream, now nearly ten years ago; but since that interview in Nithbank Wood I'm more hopelessly in love than ever;' and, somehow, I began to blush, and I was glad his back was turned toward me.

'Imphm! Ay, the old story is ever new,' he said, more to himself than to me; and he rose slowly from his chair, knocked the ashes out of his pipe on the top rib of the grate, and came over to my bedside. 'Have you told Betty of this strange meeting?'

'No.'

'Why?'

'Well, doctor, I can hardly explain why I haven't told her, as the dear old soul is "nearer" to me than any one else in the world; but I felt, somehow, that I wanted to confide in you first.'

'Thank you, Mr Russell; and it will be a joyful day when you and I and Betty can talk it all over among us. Meanwhile we'll keep it to ourselves, you and I, and I don't think you should allow this—this *affaire de cœur* to

monopolise your mind too much. To worry and distract your thoughts over it would be as harmful as it would be futile. So far, the stars have fought in their courses for you, and, without much exertion on your part, your fondest dreams seem in a fair way to be fulfilled. William—no "Mr Russell" after a crack like this!—I am more than double your age, and for many years I have lived a queer, prosaic, loveless life—a full life if hard work and gain and recognition be reckoned everything, but empty—oh God, how empty!—if love counts for all. I am old, but not so old that I cannot understand you and sympathise with you, for I well remember days which were brightened to me by the sunshine of a woman's loving smile; times when all this earth was heaven to me, the singing of the birds an angel song, all its people upright and just; sermons I read in stones, and good I saw in everything. But that was long ago. When love was taken away from me the whole world seemed changed. My life since then has been selfish and self-centred. I have long ceased to take any interest in the social doings of others; and were it not for my work, my books, and my daily communings with nature, I should be a lonely, miserable old man. I don't mind telling you, however, that you have touched a chord

in my heart and awakened memories which have slumbered long. I am very much interested in you, partly on account of your own personality, but mainly because it was a very near relative of yours who brought to me the only true joy and gladness that my heart has ever known.'

He sat down on the basket chair at the foot of my bed, facing me, and with his back to the light.

'You will doubtless remember,' he continued, 'that, during my first visit to you here, Betty in course of conversation, casually or otherwise, mentioned the name of your aunt Margaret.'

'Yes, doctor, I remember that distinctly, and also that you were visibly affected; but'——

'I must confess I was, William,' he quickly interposed. 'Well, confidence for confidence. You have told me your love experience, so far as it has gone, and it may be that, by doing so, you have relieved your mind and hastened your recovery; and perhaps, if I recount mine to one who can understand, it will bring a balm and a solace to my old heart, of which, in these my years of sear and yellow leaves, I often stand sorely in need. You—you don't mind my smoking?'

'Certainly not, doctor; and, to be sociable, I'll join you in a pipe.'

'That's right—that's right! Nothing like tobacco for promoting good-fellowship.'

We filled our pipes in silence. Though it was only late noon, the light seemed to be darkening in my little room. I looked toward the window, and down from a dull leaden sky the first of winter's snowflakes were quietly falling—falling, as it appeared to me, into the eager upstretched arms of the leafless lime. The doctor's gaze followed mine; and slowly, with his pipe filled but not lit, he rose from his chair and looked long and thoughtfully toward the quiet, obscured Dry Gill.

'I have always loved to see snow falling,' he said, after a pause. 'It has a strange fascination for me; and to see it in its fleecy flakes, whirling and dancing and drifting and playing, is a sight which always soothes and inspires me. I pray God that my eyesight may long be spared to me, because it is an avenue through which many of His richly stored treasures are conveyed. I have no ear for music—instrumental music I mean particularly; but, strangely enough, a wimplin' burn can speak to me in its flow, a mavis can call me from my study into my garden, and the eerie yammer of the whaup in the moorland

solitude is always to me, as it is to Robert Wanlock, "a wanderin' word frae hame." The human voice raised in song conveys nothing to me, but the crooning lullaby of a loving mother over her suffering child tirls the strings of my heart and makes me humble. To be unable to *feel* the pleading of the violin, the rich soprano, and the resonant bass is something I deplore. But Providence has ordained that if one sense is minus one, another sense will be plus one. Well, my sense of sight is plus one, both in strength and appreciation; and in the midst of these beautiful surroundings in which, for the last forty years, my lines have been cast, I have revelled, William—positively revelled. The opportunity has always been mine of noting the changing of the seasons—the virgin green and promise of spring, the glory and fullness of summer, the russet and gold of autumn, the sleep and decay of winter—and each, to him who can see aright, has a beauty and significance of its own. Ay, and this is winter—winter heralded by a shimmering veil of pirling snowflakes, through whose dancing meshes I can trace phantom forms I saw in youth, and whose madcap antics still, thank God! bring me solace as of yore. Oh, how grateful and thankful I ought to be!'

He lit his pipe with a paper spill, and stood for a minute blowing clouds of smoke round the old china dog on my mantelpiece. Then he resumed his seat at the foot of my bed; and, inclining his head sideways toward the window, he said, 'The last good-bye I said to your aunt Margaret was spoken amidst falling snow, and it is strange that I should be speaking of her to you for the first time with these flimsy flakes dimming your window-pane. There 's not much to tell you, William; and, to be candid with you, when I was standing smoking at your fireplace there the thought came to me that, as your mother had never deemed it expedient or necessary to mention my name to you, it would be more in agreement with her will that I should be silent. However, as I have started, I may as well proceed; but I shall be brief, as I haven't the heart to go into what must ever be sacred details. I first met your aunt Margaret in Edinburgh, when I was at the University. Her father—your grandfather, Colonel Kennedy—had returned from India, where he had served with distinction, and had, with his wife and two daughters, taken up residence in the suburb of Murrayfield. Being of a Dumfriesshire family, and well known to my father, who was a merchant in Dumfries and Provost of that town, Colonel

Kennedy, on the strength of my father's letter of introduction, gave me a hearty welcome to his domestic circle, a welcome of which I may say I took ample advantage. Your father and mother got married shortly after I became acquainted with the family; and as your aunt Margaret was thus deprived of a sister and companion to whom she was ardently attached, I gladly embraced every opportunity of showing her little kindly attentions, acting the part of a thoughtful brother, and generally doing my utmost to minimise the loss which I was sure she had sustained. Well, William, this ended in the usual way. Sympathy begets love, and I fell hopelessly in love with Margaret Kennedy. How I found out that my love was returned is a secret which is a joy to me, too holy to share even with you, William. Ah me! the happiness of those halcyon days—the quiet afternoons in that old drawing-room facing southward to the distant Pentlands, the evening walks on Corstorphine Hill when the sunset rays still lingered above Ben Lomond, the talks we had of the future we had planned! Tennyson says that "sorrow's crown of sorrow is remembering happier things." That may be poetic, but I don't think it is true, for it is a crown of joy to me to call these times to mind, and I feel that to have had this experience, and to have

garnered such memories, I have surely not lived in vain. Our love, as is the case with all young people, was unreasoning. We gave no thought to ways and means, and position or status we never for a moment considered. But your grandfather brought us to earth and faced us with realities. In response to a written request, I waited on him one evening, and in a very few words he gave me to understand that I must on no account pay further attention to his daughter, and that my visits to his house must cease. He reproached me with lack of honour in taking advantage of his hospitality to further my own interests and clandestinely win the affection of your aunt Margaret. I repudiated this charge, perhaps somewhat warmly, informed him that if I had broken any of the accepted social laws in the matter, I had done so in ignorance, and assured him I loved his daughter, and that nothing short of her renunciation would deter me from some day making her my wife. He lost his temper, and bluntly asked me if, for a moment, I, a prospectless student and son of a provincial merchant, considered myself worthy of a Kennedy of Knockshaw; whereupon I told him that there were Griersons in Lag, as wardens of the Border Marches, when the Kennedys were sitting in farmyard barns

making spoons out of ram-horns. The old reiver blood coursed warmly through my veins, and I faced him without fear. This was the last straw. He raised his cane to strike me; but, noting my air of defiance, he immediately lowered it, and pointed to the door. I bowed in silence, then walked slowly out, and I never entered the house again.

'The days which followed that interview were perhaps the most miserable I ever spent. I had had no opportunity of seeing your aunt; and though I knew she loved me, and that no mercenary considerations would sway her, still there was the uncertainty of it all, under altered circumstances, and the possibility of her being dominated by her father's masterful will. At last, after weary weeks of waiting, of alternate spells of hope and despair, I received a letter from her, written from a lonely island in the Pentland Firth, and letting me know that she had been sent thither by her father on a visit to her uncle, who at that time was proprietor of the island of Stroma. She assured me of her unfaltering love, told me that nothing on earth would shake her resolve, and that, notwithstanding her father's threats, she would join me sooner or later in a haven of rest. She would take my love for granted, and asked me not to write, as my

letters would be intercepted. With this ray of hope I had to be content. She wrote to me at intervals; but, as letter followed letter, each became more despondent and despairing, and at last she informed me that it was evident she would not be allowed to return until she promised not to see or correspond with me again. Then came a little, short note pleading for an interview. "It is a long journey, I know," she wrote; "but I dearly—oh, so dearly!—wish to see you again. Your presence will cheer me and strengthen me to bear whatever the future may hold. On Wednesday next my uncle goes to Kirkwall, and on that afternoon I will walk down to a little sheltered creek called Corravoe. It is the nearest point to the mainland, and only a mile or two from Huna. Matthew Howat has a good boat. When you reach Huna ask for Matthew. He knows everything, and will help us." . . . Never a day passes but that weird, solitary scene comes before my eyes—no trees, no hills, no signs of human habitation; only a short, gray-green stretch of low-lying, patchy landscape, bordered by a narrow strip of rocky beach, lapped by the crested tide of the Pentland Flow. One short hour we spent together, for the tide was turning, but the smile of hope shone in her wan face ere we said good-bye.

I was the bearer of joyful news, comforting words, and assurance of release. I told her I was specialising in Edinburgh; that an unexpected legacy of three thousand pounds had paved the way to our happiness; and that, when I had arranged with my mother for her reception, she would sail across to Huna, and find me waiting her there. . . . The roar of the far-off skerries is in my ear, the echoing homeward cry of the seabird, the humming and hissing of the waves among the shells on the shingle! The shortening day is drawing to a close, mist is clinging to the scarred face of Dunnet Head, from the darkening sky the snow is falling, and through the whirling flakes she fades from my sight.

'A day came when again I was in Huna, looking across the angry, wind-tossed Pentland Firth, waiting for a boat which, alas! never reached its haven. What happened no one ever knew. The sullen waters guard their secrets well; but a broken oar bearing Matthew Howat's initials, picked up in Scrabster Bay, told a story which robbed my life of the only light which ever shone in my soul.'

The doctor sat for a minute, after he had finished his story, with his eyes closed and his chin resting on the knot of his stock. Then he wearily rose from his chair and went quietly

downstairs without saying good-bye. He has a keen sense of the fitness of things, and I feel he knew that no word of mine, no pressure of my hand, was needed to prove to him that my heart was with him.

CHAPTER X.

THE painters have come and gone, and on the dining-room walls and woodwork they have left evidence of tasty, careful workmanship. John Boyes, to whom the question of wall-paper was referred, was of the opinion that the decorative scheme adopted by Mrs Black for her parlour was not exactly applicable or advisable in our case; so Betty at once deferred to his better judgment, but warned us, all the same, that if the work didn't turn out a success we were not to blame her. There was, however, no occasion for what she calls 'castin' up,' as the room looks exceedingly well, and we—that is, Betty and I—have complimented John Boyes, who likewise looks exceedingly well, not so much perhaps by reason of our commendation, but because his account was asked for and paid the day after the work was completed. I understand the general rule in the locality is to pay tradesmen's accounts once a year, and when I offered such prompt payment John was both surprised and perplexed.

'I thocht, Mr Russell,' he said, 'that you

were satisfied wi' the job;' and he placed his hat on Betty's kitchen dresser, fastened a button in his coat, and stood on the defensive.

'And I *am* pleased with the job, Boyes,' I replied. 'You and your men have worked well, and—and whistled well,' I added, with a laugh; 'and in attending to this work just now you have suited my convenience.'

'Well—but—does it no' look as if ye werena pleased when ye're payin' me so soon?'

'No, no, Boyes, you mustn't think that. I happen just now to have the money beside me, and now that the work is completed it is yours, not mine.'

'Oh, that puts a different complexion on the face o't, as the monkey said when he pented the cat green;' and he gave a cough of relief, and surreptitiously bit off a chew of brown twist. 'It's no' often that money's put doon on my pastin'-table, as it were, an' it's braw an' welcome, I assure you. I'll no' forget ye wi' leebral discoont, let me tell ye.' When he came back to receipt the account he borrowed a penny stamp from Betty, and with great deliberation and no little ceremony drew his pen several times through the pence column, completely obliterating the 8½d. 'Ye see, sir, when a gentleman treats me weel, I'm no' feart. We'll let the eichtpence ha'penny go

to the deevil, an' that'll be five pounds six shillin's—nate, as it were.' He stowed the notes away down in his trousers-pocket, unbuttoned and rebuttoned his coat, and jocosely informed me that the price of liquid drier was on the rise, and he would now lay in a stock before the market was too high. An hour afterwards I saw him emerge from the side-door of the inn, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, and the term 'liquid drier' was to me stripped of any technical vagueness it had previously possessed.

I have rearranged all the old dining-room pictures so that, without discarding any of them, I shall have sufficient space for the painting of Nith Bridge which the Laurieston minister looked upon as a valuable asset to his bazaar. One day, when I was confined to bed upstairs, I pencilled a note to my confidential clerk in Edinburgh, asking him to find out in which of the five Lauriestons, noted in the Post-Office Directory, a bazaar was to be held, and to make sure of purchasing thereat a certain oil-painting of which I gave full particulars. Ormskirk is a cute, long-headed chap; and, knowing the man well, I was really not surprised when, yesterday morning, I received a letter from him advising me that, without any difficulty, he had 'struck' the right

Laurieston, and that through our corresponding agent in Falkirk the picture in question had been secured. Following out my instructions, he is getting it suitably framed; so I trust shortly to see the space filled which I am reserving for it.

Poor Betty has put herself to no end of trouble over the modernising of this room. She has planned and worked unceasingly; and as she couldn't be in two places or do two things at once, Nathan and I these last few days have been in a manner neglected. I was sorry to know of her toiling on late and early, and I told her to get a woman in to help her; but all she said, and that with a sniff, too, was, 'It may happen;' and for the first time I saw Betty's nose in the air. And now that everything is done that she recommended, she is regretting all the expense I have been put to, and bewailing the fact that 'efter a' it was hardly worth while.' 'It 's a braw, braw room, Maister Weelum,' she said, as she surveyed it for the twentieth time from the doorway—'a braw room indeed, and I trust ye 'll lang be spared to enjoy it. Ay, I do that;' and she sighed.

I looked keenly and quickly at her.

'No, no, Maister Weelum, I dinna mean that. I 'm no' a dabbler amang leaf-mould;'

and she laughed cheerily. 'A' the same, an' jokin' apairt, I trust ye'll live to get the guid o' a' your ootlay. At ony rate, ye'll be gey bien here ower the winter. An' when ye're weel again, an' away back to yer wark in Embro', ye'll no' forget that ye have sic a place here. Somewey, I think ye'll get marrit sune—hoo I think sae I canna tell, but the look's comin' to your e'e—an' whaever the lucky leddy may be, ye needna be feart to bring her here, for it's a room fit for a duchess.'

The early fall of snow, which I shall ever associate with the doctor's love-story, was, after all, very slight, and except in the uplands, where it lies in the crevices gleaming white in the wintry sun, it has almost entirely disappeared. I have been allowed outside again, and, but for a little stiffness, due, the doctor says, to inaction, I am feeling wonderfully strong and even vigorous.

John Kellock the butcher is the nominal owner of an old bobtailed collie which rejoices in the name of Bang. Bang carries with him into old age many mementos of his pugilistic days, not the least obvious of which are a tattered and limp ear and a short, deformed foreleg. He is long past active service, and only barks now from the shop-door when sheep

pass along the village street; but he dearly loves a quiet saunter down the pavement and along the country road with any one who has a mind to chum with him and can keep step with his. John Sterling the shoemaker is also the nominal owner of a dog, a Dandie Dinmont named Jip, which was long a doughty antagonist of Bang, but he is now on the pension list too, and glad of congenial company of limited locomotive capabilities. So the three of us—all more or less 'crocks,' and mutually sympathetic—take a constitutional together almost every day. I have mentioned Jip last, but really it was he who made friends with me first. His master made no demur to Jip's frequent strolls with me, as the shoemaker himself leads a sedentary life, and no man knows better than he that a dog should get exercise; but since Jip has on more than one occasion taken French leave and remained overnight with me, I am afraid jealousy is springing up in the shoemaker's breast. Bang noted the ripening acquaintanceship, and girned disapproval as we passed the butcher's shop; but I never neglected an opportunity of scratching his shaggy underjaw and talking coaxingly in a 'doggie' way to him, and so it came to pass that after following us bit by bit, day by day, he agreed with Jip to bury

the hatchet, and we are now a happy trio and the very best of friends.

As companions in a country walk I prefer Bang and Jip to any man I know. I can be silent and meditative, and they don't feel neglected or out of it; and when I am minded to talk, they, in the wag of the tail and the intelligent look of the eye, respond and approve. But they never trespass upon my attention or disturb my vein of thought.

At first, after our walk, when I reached Betty's door, I asked them to come inside, but they stood with a dubious look in their eyes and with heads turned sideways. Then Jip evidently remembered that John Sterling had paid his license, and that he was in duty bound to make some show of recognition, so he walked sedately and with fixed purpose across the street; while Bang, with recurrent memories of truant acts associated with ash-plants, limped his way to Kellock's door. Now, however, they have both flung discretion and fears to the winds, and accompany me to my fireside with an 'at home' sort of air, and just as if Betty's abode were their own.

Betty has a cat, a very nice, comfortable-looking cat, with a glossy, well-cared-for fur, and a strong masculine face; and she often wonders why I take no notice of Jessie, as she,

in her simplicity, misnames him. The truth is, God's creatures, great and small, interest and appeal to me, but I cannot love cats. I admire their graceful movements, their agility, their cleanliness so far as their fur is concerned; but their eyes cannot draw me lovingly to them as a dog's can, and I have the feeling that they are capable of loving only those who minister to their wants, and that they are putting up with domesticity because it assures them of food and shelter without putting them to the trouble and inconvenience of seeking it for themselves. I am sorry I cannot love Jessie, but it can't be helped. Jessie, I know, never loved me; and since Bang and Jip have got entry to the house I know 'she' positively hates me.

This afternoon Bang and Jip accompanied me as usual in my stroll, and after I had leisurely surveyed all the countryside around, and the two dogs had to their hearts' content explored every rat-run in the roots of the bordering hedgerows, we turned for home. For a little while I halted at Hastie's gate, and watched with interest the northward rush of the afternoon express. I remembered how, when a boy, I used to stand at this coign of vantage, with my eyes riveted on the speeding trains, following them in imagination and desire

through distant fields and woods, past towns I knew of only through my geography, on and away to the busy, bustling terminus on the Clyde, with its big houses, its long streets, and attractive shops. How I envied the driver on the footplate, and how I longed to be a passenger with him *en route* to the city which was then to me unknown and unexplored! *Experientia docet;* the express in its flight was as interesting to me as it was then, but the desire and longing to be in it were lacking. 'No, no,' I said to myself; 'no bustling city for me at present. Here around me is life without veneer; here is the peace I crave; here, I feel, is the goal.' The sound of approaching footsteps cut short my reverie. I turned my head, and for the second time I looked into the eyes of my dream-lady.

Had I had time to gather my wits and consider the situation, I should probably have recognised her presence by merely raising my hat, but this was denied me; and, acting on a sudden impulse, I went forward to meet her with my hand outstretched. With a look of surprise and, I imagined, annoyance, she stopped and regarded me earnestly for a moment. In a flash it came to me that we had never been introduced, and I blushed awkwardly and retreated a step, muttering an incoherent apology.

Then ensued a long pause, an awkward silence. It was Bang who came to the rescue, and saved the situation. Wagging his scraggy apology for a tail, he sidled up to her, and in an ingratiating, wheedling way which only a dog possesses, he claimed her attention. She spoke to him, and stroked his shaggy head. Then Jip ventured forward, demanding his share of her favours, and she bent down and asked him his name. I remained tongue-tied and ill at ease, and was wishing myself a hundred miles away, when she suddenly looked toward me and smiled.

'I consider a collie and a Dandie Dinmont ideal companions,' she said. 'They are evidently very much attached to you, and old friends are the best friends.'

'Friends, yes; but they don't belong to me,' I replied. 'Bang here is an old pensioner of the village butcher, and wee Jip is the apple of our local shoemaker's eye. We've been good chums since I came down here, and I seldom go for a walk without them.'

'They weren't with you that day in Nithbank Wood?'

'No.'

'By the way,' she hastily interposed, as if glad of an opening, 'I am pleased to have met you again, and to see you are none the worse

of your indiscretion in venturing so far when you weren't feeling fit. You have only one walking-stick now, instead of two; so I argue you are making good progress. Do you know,' she continued, and she gave me a look which set my heart thumping, 'I have, time and again, reproached myself for leaving you as I did. You acknowledged you had attempted too much, and you looked so helpless, so—so'—— and she hesitated. 'What *is* that very expressive Scots word, now? So'——

'Forfaughten,' I hazarded.

'That's it—forfaughten; and you must have felt forfaughten, otherwise the word wouldn't have appealed to you as suitable.'

'Well, I admit now, I was, but at the time I didn't wish you, a lady and a stranger, to know it. Besides, you had already done a good deal for me, which, allow me to repeat, I shall not readily forget.'

I was gradually regaining the confidence I had lost, and felt inclined to say more, and to tell her of my dream and what her presence meant to me; but I restrained myself; and, pointing to the paint-box she carried, I changed the subject by asking her if she was finding much inspiration in our beautiful surroundings.

'Yes—oh yes!' she replied; 'it is a beautiful countryside, and the longer I live in it the

more I see in it to admire. A wooded locality, such as this, looks at its best—at least from an artist's standpoint—in the late autumn, when sufficient foliage is shed to allow the gray-purple of the branches to mingle with the yellow and russet of the leaves. I am fortunate in being here at this particular time, and I have made quite a number of sketches, which I may work up later. But I am not really an artist. I am only a humble amateur, though I may to an extent have the eye of an artist—to appreciate all the beautiful sights, you know, and that, after all, is something. But I must be going. Good-afternoon; and I 'm glad that you are getting on so nicely.—Good-bye, Bang. —Good-bye, Jip;' and she gave them a parting pat, and with a smile on her face which I long remembered, she walked slowly away.

It is a very slender hair to make a tether with, but somehow the fact of her remembering the dogs by name is a consoling thought, and a source of peculiar satisfaction to me.

CHAPTER XI.

WHEN I got home, and was comfortably seated in my arm-chair by the fire, Betty came in to set my tea, and I wasn't long in noticing that, from her abstracted air and the listless way she was moving about, she had something on her mind. She looked for a moment or two at Bang and Jip lying comfortably curled up on the hearthrug. 'Thae dugs are braw an' snug lyin' there,' she said; 'an' my puir Jessie 's sittin' in the cauld stick-hoose in the huff. No' that I grudge them their warm bed, for I 'm gled—he'rt gled—to see them peaceable at last wi' yin anither. It 's nae time since they were girnin' an' fechtin' an' tumblin' ower each ither frae the Cross to the Gill, an' noo, haith, they canna get ower cheek-for-chowie. Ye maun ha'e a wonderfu' wey wi' dugs, Maister Weelum. It 's a peety ye couldna exert it in ither weys.'

I know Betty too well to venture assistance, and I had the feeling that she would soon work her way round to her subject without my aiding and abetting.

'The kettle will soon be through the boil,

an' ye'll get your tea in a jiffy,' she said. 'Imphm! it's a gey comfortable-lookin' chair, that yin opposite ye, Maister Weelum; an', d'ye ken, I met a leddy the day that I wad like to see sittin' in it.'

'Indeed, Betty!'

'Ay. I dinna ken when I was sae much impressed wi' onybody at first sicht as I was this day; an' when I was sittin' lookin' at her, an' listenin to her voice, something whispered in my ear, "That's the wife for my boy."'

'My goodness, Betty, you're forcing the pace!' I laughingly said. 'First you wish to see this lady sitting in my chair, and in your next breath you say you wish to see her my wife! Where did you meet this paragon?'

'Weel, this efternoon, when you an' the dugs were away yer walk, I slippit in next door juist for a meenit to see hoo they were a' gettin' on, an', as I usually do, I opened the door withoot knockin' an' walked strecht ben to the kitchen, an' there, Maister Weelum, sittin' on the wee laich nursin'-chair at the fireside, was the leddy I speak o'. I gaed to gang back into the lobby; but Mrs Jardine wadna hear o't, an' she made me step in, an' she introduced me, quite the thing, mind you. Ye see, Tom's wife was toon bred, an' she kens a' the weys o't, an' she mentioned me by name an' the leddy by name;

an' if she had been staunin' in a drawin'-room on a Turkey carpet, an' cled in brocade, she couldna ha'e dune it better. I juist didna catch the leddy's name, for, what wi' the suddenness, her bonny face, an' ae thing an' anither, I was sairly flabbergasted an' putten aboot. It seems, hooever, that she 's in the picter-pentin' line, an' she 's ta'en a great fancy to wee Isobel, an' she 's makin' a portrait o' her. A week or twae bygane she saw the wee lass staunin' at the door as she was passin', an' she was so struck wi' her bonny wee face an' her lang fair hair that she spoke to her an' asked to see her mither. Weel, the upshot o' this was that, as I 've said, she is pentin' her, an' a capital picter she 's makin'. It 's hardly finished yet. I ken fules an' bairns should never see hauf-dune wark, an' I 'm no' a judge, into the bargain; but I 'll say this, photographin' micht be quicker an' mair o' a deid likeness, but it 's no' in it wi' yon for naturalness and bonny life-like colour. But that 's by the wey, as it were. Her work is guid, withoot a doot, but she hersel 's a perfect picter.'

I felt my heart beginning to thump and throb, and my breath getting catchy. 'Pity you missed her name, Betty,' I said with forced unconcern.

'Ay, as I telt ye, I was putten aboot, an'

missed it; but I 'll speir at Mrs Jardine again, 'at will I.'

'And—and what is the lady like?' I asked, with as much indifference as I could command.

'Weel, Maister Weelum, I juist canna exactly tell ye. She 's yin o' the few folks ye meet in a lifetime that ye canna judge o' or scrutinise bit by bit. It 's impossible to do that wi' her; you 've to tak' her in a' at aince, as it were; ye ken what I mean—eh?'

I did, and I didn't; but I nodded as if I understood.

'What struck me mair than ocht else,' she continued, 'was her couthie, affable mainner. To look at her ye wad think that she 's a' drawn thegether—prood-like, ye ken, wi' an almichty set apairt kind o' an air; but whenever she speaks an' looks at ye, ye 've the feelin' that she 's a' roon aboot ye, an' that there 's only her an' you in the whole world. An' she was so composed an' calm, so weel-bred withoot bein' uppish! Oh, I tell ye she juist talked away to Mrs Jardine an' me as if we were o' her ain kind. An' when she rose up to gang away, an' was staunin' her full heicht lookin' doon on us, do you know, Maister Weelum, she seemed to me to be kind o' glorified, an' the kitchen an' a' its plenishin's faded frae my sicht, an' a' I was conscious o'

was the kindly glent o' twae big dark een an' the feelin' that I was in the presence o' some yin by-ordinar'—imphm! An' efter she had gane I couldna carry on a wiselike conversation wi' Mrs Jardine for listenin' to the whispered words in my ear, "That's the yin! That's the wife for Maister Weelum."'

. . . . . .

Since the forenights began to lengthen the doctor has got into the way of dropping in and smoking a quiet, meditative pipe with me over the chess-board. When he called to-night I drew out the little table with the squared top, and we settled down to our game. But my mind was not concerned with bishops, pawns, and knights, and my thoughts kept careering between Hastie's gate and Mrs Jardine's kitchen. I made an effort to centre my interest, and to look the part of the keen, zealous player; but, unfortunately, I cannot dissemble. I lost two pawns very stupidly, and the doctor looked keenly at me, but said nothing. I blundered on, and at last I made a move which caused the doctor to smile. He got up, relit his pipe, and sank into an easy-chair. 'Ah, William,' he said, 'Love is a tyrant! Heart claimed, thoughts claimed, all dancing attendance on the enslaver.'

I blushed, and made a show of riping my

pipe into the coal-scuttle to hide my confusion. Then I told him of the meeting on the Carronbrig road, and of Betty's experience in Mrs Jardine's kitchen.

'The plot thickens, William,' he said as he rose to go; 'and if I were you I would tell her of your dream next time you meet her. It will interest her in you; and, you know, once interest is aroused—well, love will follow. Good-night.'

My picture has arrived, and I have got it hung in a favourable light, in a place of honour above the mantelpiece. I became quite excited when it was delivered, and, like a child with a new toy, was impatient to see it, and to gloat over it. But the lid of the wooden case was tightly screwed down; and, as a hammer and a saw were the only joinery tools which Betty possessed, I had to call in Deacon Webster's aid, and Betty, poor body, got no peace till he arrived with his screwdriver. When at length the picture was taken out of its packing I noticed there was no signature in the corner, and this at the time was a keen disappointment to me; but it has ceased to trouble me now, because I have the feeling that it will shortly bear the artist's name, and till that time comes, when I am not admiring her handiwork, I shall just entertain myself

filling the corner space with names which appeal to my mind as fitting and appropriate.

When I asked Nathan's opinion of my purchase, he looked several times very deliberately from me to the picture; then, after a pause, informed me he had 'never till noo seen purple gress.' I explained to him that this was the purple sunset glow; but he shook his head sceptically, spat in my fire, and walked slowly ben into the kitchen. Betty, who spent her early girlhood in the Keir, is delighted that a picture in which her native parish hills are depicted should be hanging on her walls, and she was very anxious to know who the painter was, and how it came into my possession. I just said I was very much interested in the artist, and that the picture had been sent from Edinburgh. She pointed out to me, what I hadn't noticed before, that the bright richness of the gold frame made the others shabby and tarnished-looking, and she warmly advocated the application of a liquid gold paint which John Boyes retails at sixpence a bottle, and which, she assures me, 'is liker pure gold than a sovereign.' Betty dearly loves to dabble in paint. It was Nathan who acquainted me with this predilection, and he instanced a case of her blue-enamelling the long hazel crook, the representative staff of the

Ancient Order of Shepherds, which on gala-days he carries in the procession; and another, when she varnished, with a strange concoction, a workbox which she has never been able to open since. Knowing this, I purposely belittled Boyes's liquid, and assured her that in a week or two our eyes would become so accustomed to the conditions that we shouldn't distinguish any difference between the frames. It grieves me very much to thwart Betty; though, truth to tell, I seldom have occasion to do so, as our opinions on the big things of life, the essentials, are rarely in conflict, and the smaller we think not worth wrangling over; so I talked her into a gracious, amenable humour, and ultimately took leave of the subject in what I considered mutual agreement.

This morning, however, when she brought up my ante-breakfast cup of tea, she reverted to the subject without any preliminaries. 'Man, Maister Weelum,' she began, 'I 've juist been takin' anither look roon' the dinin'-room. Noo, since we 've got it done up it 's the first thing I do in the mornin' an' the last at nicht; an', do ye know, I feel quite prood an' important when I 'm puttin' a nice white cover on the big table, an' the silver candelabra in the centre o't. But, oh man, since yesterday I 'm positively he'rt-sorry for thae

auld frames. In a mainner it's my pleesure spoiled; to me it's a case o' deid flies in the ointment, ye understaun? Imphm! an' I'm gettin' fair angry at the new yin hangin' oot so prominently an' skinklin' as if to chaw the ithers. Dod, I imagine it's laughin' an' jeerin' at them. Noo, Maister Weelum, twae six-penny bottles o' John Boyes's gold spread oot thin would amaist do the whole lot, an'—an' I'll put it on mysel'. I'm rale knacky wi' a brush. It'll no' come to much—imphm! the cost'll be very little. What think ye?'

'I don't know, Betty, I'm sure. I'm sorry to know the old frames annoy your eye. Personally I like the old ones better than the new one; but I'll tell you what, Betty,' I said gleefully, as a happy thought struck me; 'we'll get the new frame coated over with some sort of stuff to dull it down a bit. They'll be all alike then. How would that do?'

'It'll no' do at a', Maister Weelum,' she said emphatically. 'That picter maunna be touched. No! no! It has some history, or I'm cheated. Time will prove'——

A sudden loud knocking echoed through the house and cut short her sentence. 'Mercy me, what a bang!' she said. 'That's Milligan the postman, an' as sure as my name's Betty Grier he'll bash through that door some day;'

and, to my relief—for she was stumbling into 'kittle' ground—she hurried downstairs.

Since I came here my correspondence has become almost a negligible quantity. I rarely write to any one, and the few letters I receive are of a more or less private business character. I had two this morning—one from the treasurer of my club reminding me my subscription is due at the end of this month, and the other from my partner, Murray Monteith, who, after alluding to minor matters, writes as follows:

'Now for the real reason of my troubling you at this time. The Hon. Mrs Stuart wrote to me yesterday from Nithbank House, near Thornhill, saying she was desirous of consulting me on a very important subject; but owing to indisposition she couldn't travel to Edinburgh, and she would be much obliged if I could make it convenient to call on her at that address any day next week. I wrote to her by return saying I would travel south on Wednesday first, and would be with her during the early afternoon of that day. As you know, I am a stranger to your native county; but I presume Nithbank House is within driving distance of Thornhill, and as I am due at the station of that name at 11.30 A.M., I shall thus have ample time to call on you

prior to my visit, and talk over matters with you.

'The important subject she refers to is, without doubt, in connection with the affairs of her brother-in-law, the late General Stuart, which, I regret to say, are still in a most unsatisfactory state, owing to our inability to unearth a will or to procure any information regarding his marriage. We have made exhaustive inquiry in every conceivable direction, but without result; and his daughter, Miss Stuart, must now be acquainted with the facts as they at present stand. She called here on the 17th ult., and asked to see you. Ormskirk informed her that you were at present invalided in the country, and showed her into my room. We talked over matters in a general way, and I think I managed to satisfy her on the main points, without giving her any reason to suspect we were faced with such serious difficulties. But, as I have said, she must be told now, and I approach this part of the business with misgivings, as it is a very delicate matter indeed; and, from the little I have seen of her, I argue she will take it very keenly to heart. For us to inform her, in our cold, unfeeling legal phraseology, that she is, in the eyes of the law, illegitimate would be nothing short of brutal, and I trust we may prevail on her

aunt to discharge this unenviable obligation. I assure you I have no desire to trouble you unnecessarily at this time with business concerns; but, as you are in the immediate locality, and are not only acquainted with the parties, but conversant with all the details of this case, I hope you will see your way to accompany me to Nithbank. Miss Stuart informed me that she had transacted business by correspondence only, and that she had not yet met you. Would this not be a good opportunity for us all to meet and decide what ought to be done?'

Needless to say, I shall be delighted to receive Murray Monteith here. We must arrange to have him remain overnight with us, and I shall take peculiar pleasure in introducing him to Betty and Nathan and Dr Grierson, types, I feel sure, which he has never met before, but which I am equally sure he will appreciate. I shall certainly accompany him to Nithbank House; and I must be prepared to have the vials of the Hon. Mrs Stuart's wrath poured out upon me when she learns that for almost six months I have resided within two miles of her, and have not considered it my duty and privilege to call on her. I am very, very sorry to learn from Monteith that things have turned out so unfortunately;

but somehow I have dreaded such an outcome all along. And my heart goes out to that poor girl who is likely to lose her patrimony under the inexorable law of succession. But, wait now, let me think. Yes, these four thousand Banku oil shares which her father transferred to her, on her coming of age, are hers, and cannot be contested; so that, after all, if our worst fears regarding the property are realised, she will not be penniless. I wonder if she is a level-headed business girl, and if she knows to what extent she will benefit from this. Banku oils are worth looking after. This will be one cheering subject, at least, which we may broach to her. But, after all, the stigma of illegitimacy remains, and money cannot make up for that. Poor girl!

CHAPTER XII.

PONDERING these thoughts, I slowly dressed and went downstairs to breakfast; but so wrapped up was I in reflection, and engrossed in legal procedure and probable eventualities, that when Betty appeared with my bacon and egg I could scarcely reconcile myself to my surroundings or at once realise my whereabouts. Fortunately she didn't notice my preoccupied air, otherwise my firm's long, blue, tax-looking letter would again have been blamed and execrated; nor did she make any attempt to pick up the thread-ends of our conversation regarding the regilding of the old frames. I wondered at this, as the conditions were propitious; and Betty, as a rule, follows up the trail of a crack as surely and consistently as a weasel follows a hare.

'Joe's in the back-kitchen brushin' your boots,' she said, as she handed me the morning papers; and I sighed with relief in the knowledge that Boyes's liquid was likely, for the time being at least, to remain on his shop shelf. 'Puir sowl, he's quite pleased when I ask him to do ocht for you,' she continued. 'Yesterday,

withoot bein' bid, he got oot yin o' your suits o' claes an' pressed it wi' my big smoothin' ern on the kitchen table, an' he 's made sic a job o't as wud be a credit to ony whip-the-cat. He has learned mair than drillin' in the airmy, I tell ye.'

'I believe that, Betty,' I said. 'The service is often a capital schoolmaster. But it was very good of him to look to my clothes. I 'll not forget him for that.'

'Oh, mercy me, Maister Weelum, dinna you gi'e him ocht! He wad be black affronted an' terribly displeased if ye offered him money. No, no, it 's neither wisdom nor charity to gi'e to Joe, for he 's made mair siller lately than he kens hoo to tak' care o'. I can tell ye he cam' hame this time wi' a weel-filled pouch, an' for the first week o' six workin' days he did mak' it spin!'

'Spin, Betty? How in the world did he contrive to make money spin in Thornhill?' I asked.

'Haith, if ye had only seen him ye wadna need to ask. Ahem, spin! Ay, Joe can not only mak' the money spin, but he spins himsel', an' he mak's every yin spin that 'll sit wi' him. But mebbe I 'm gaun ower quick. Did ye no' ken that Joe tak's a dram?'

'No, Betty, I did not; and, as he 's a

brother of Nathan's, I 'm surprised to know it.'

'Oh, weel, but it 's juist possible that I 'm wrangin' Joe noo. He 's what I wad ca' a regular drammer—tak's his gless o' beer every day—ye ken ; but aince a year, an' for a while efter he comes back, he gangs fairly ower the score baith wi' drinkin' himsel' an' treatin' ithers. Ye ken he then has siller galore among his fingers, an' wi' Joe, as wi' the rest o' folk, "the fu' cup 's no' easy carried." Last year he had a gey time o't ; spent a lot, an' grudged it terribly when it was a' gane. Nathan canna be bothered wi' 'im in his thochtlessness. A' he says is "Benjy 's a fule." He ca's him Benjy because he 's the youngest o' the family. Ay, that 's a' he says. But somewey I 'm sorry for Joe, an' I 'm aye ceevil an' nice to him. An', what think ye, Maister Weelum ? He has signed the pledge to please me, 'at has he, an' he hasna touched a drap for nearly three weeks. It 's wonderfu' what a bit word will do, if it 's spoken in season.'

'Yes, Betty, that is so,' I said meditatively ; 'that is so. It is very good of you to interest yourself in Joe. I 'm sure he 'll bless your name every day.'

'Imphm ! I 've nae doot he does ; in fact, I 'm sure he does ;' and a queer smile broke over

Betty's face. 'Ay, he blesses my name, sure enough; he 's a Hebron, ye ken. The Hebrons never say much, but they look a tremendous lot, an' Joe 's been lookin' at me lately as if he was blessin' me. The fact is, he 's sairly off his usual. He has a queer cowed look I never saw before. Oh, the man 's no' weel, an' I 'm sure he blames me for it. This mornin', when he cam' doon, he was lookin' fair meeserable, an' I asked him, in a kindly, sympathetic wey, how he was feelin', an' said he, "Middlin', Betty; very middlin'. It 's a very stiff job this I 've tackled. I 've been teetotal for twenty days, an' I 've saved as much as 'll buy me an oak coffin; an,' Betty, if I 'm teetotal for other twenty days, by the Lord Harry I 'll need it!" An', d' ye ken, Maister Weelum, he was sae fa'en-away-lookin' that, though I kenned it was plantin' wi' ae haun an' pu'in up wi' the ither, I gaed away an' poured him oot a wee drap, juist a jimp gless, an' then I gi'ed him your buits to brush, an' he started to whussle like a mavis.'

Betty's face was quite serious when she was telling me this, and when I looked into her kindly, concerned eyes, and thought of Joe's patient misery, I began to laugh, and I laughed till the breakfast crockery rattled. She looked at me in wonderment,

and, lifting the teapot, she made for the door.

'Excuse me, Betty, and pardon my levity,' I said; 'but just one moment'——

'Oh, I'll excuse ye,' she said, as she halted. 'There's nocht I like better mysel' than a guid laugh, but it maun be at something funny; an' if it's Joe you're laughin' at, he was far frae funny this mornin', I tell ye.'

'I can well understand that, Betty; but I was going to say'——

'Maister Weelum, excuse me interruptin' ye, but do ye believe in ghosts?'

'Do I believe in ghosts? Certainly not. Why do ye ask?'

'Weel, I'm gled to hear ye dinna believe in them. I say wi' you; but Joe's juist been tellin' me that he met a leddy this mornin' on the public street that he could sweer died twenty-fower years bygane. So what mak' ye o' that?'

'Oh Betty, Joe's most surely talking nonsense. Where did you say he met the lady?'

'Haith, Joe'll no' alloo it's nonsense. He's very positive aboot it. His story to me was that he cam' suddenly on her gaun roon Harper's corner, an' he was so frichtened an' surprised that a' gumption left him, an' he couldna look efter her either to mak' sure o'

her or to see where she was gaun. He was as white as a sheet when he cam' in to me, an' between the fricht an' the lang want o' his dram, he was in sic a state that I 'm sure the Lord will coont me justified in gi'en him a mouthfu'. What I telt ye before was only half the truth, an' noo ye ken a'.'

I don't know Joe very well. Since he came home I have had few opportunities of meeting him and analysing him; but when Betty was talking he was very vividly flung on the screen, so to speak, and a possible trait in his character occurred to me.

'Betty,' I said, 'don't you think that Joe has just worked up his ghost story and feigned excitement and agitation, knowing you had spirits in the house, and that in the peculiar circumstances you would produce the bottle?'

'No, no, I dinna think that. Joe's a Hebron, as I've said, an' the Hebrons ha'e neither the cleverness to think a thing like that oot nor the guile to carry it through. No, no, Maister Weelum; Joe met the leddy, whaever she may be, richt enough. I 'm quite sure aboot that pairt o't; but of coorse he's wrang aboot the burial. It's been some yin very like her, an' Joe's juist mistaken. Had this happened when he was as I ha'e seen him I wad never ha'e gi'en it a thocht; but this

mornin'—weel, the man was—was ower sober to be healthy.'

'As you say, he 's just made a mistake, Betty. At best, Joe 's a mysterious individual; these annual disappearances are remarkable. Have you yet learned exactly where he goes?'

Her alert ear detected a cessation of brushing and whistling, and she walked quietly to the door, keeked past it, and then gently turned the handle. 'He has finished your buits,' she said, 'an' he 's gettin' Nathan's Sabbath-day yins doon frae the shelf to gi'e them a rub. Do I ken where he gangs? Ay, I do. For a lang time I jaloused; but last nicht he telt me a' aboot it, an', as it turns oot, I havena been very far frae the mark. His wife has a wee temperance hotel—a temperance yin—she kens Joe! —in a toon ca'd Brighton. She can manage a' richt hersel' in the dull pairt o' the year, but she 's forced to get Joe in the busy time to gi'e her a haun wi' the fires an' the luggage an' siclike. She was only aince here, an' we didna see much o' her; but frae the little I did see I wad tak' her to be a fell purposefu' woman, mair cut oot for fechtin' in a toon than settlin' doon to the quiet, humdrum life o' Thornhill. Joe in the airmy wad dootless be a' richt, but oot o't an' hangin' aboot here wi' a decent pension he wad juist be an impossi-

bility. I was kind o' sorry for her when she was here. She had never been in this pairt before, an' she didna tak' very kindly to it. She couldna understaun what we said, an' we were in the same fix when she spoke. The first nicht she was in this hoose Nathan, for Joe's sake, tried to ca' the crack wi' her; but it gied him a sair heid, so he juist smiled an' noddit to her efter that. She put twae months in here, an' then she went away on her ain. First she kept lodgers; then she took this wee hotel, an' by a' accoonts she 's doin' weel. But it 's a queer, queer life for baith o' them. Never a letter passes between them, an' Joe seldom mentions her name. When he cam' back this time I asked him if his wife wasna vexed to pairt wi' him when the time cam' for him to leave, an' he said he didna ken, for he didna see her. "Ye didna see her!" said I. "Hoo was that?" "Oh," said he, "she was busy at her wark up the stairs, so I cried to her that I was away, an' she cried back, 'Right you are, Joe; so long till next July,' and that was a'." Imphm! isn't that a queer state o' maitters, Maister Weelum? Mind you, I dinna a'the-gither blame her. I ken the Hebrons. They 're a queer, quate family. Ye never can tell what they 're thinkin'. I 've the best o' them—ay, the best—an' I often shut my een an' thank

God for Nathan; but if he had marrit ony ither woman—I mean a woman wha didna ken him as I do, or mak' allowances as I can, an' though she had been an angel frae heaven—she wad ha'e been as meeserable as I am happy. Ay, it was lang, lang before I understood Nathan, an' the kennin' o' him was a dreich job, but it was worth it a'. Ye see, the Hebrons havena got the faculty o' expressin' their feelin's. They may be pleased or angry—it 's a' yin—they never let on in their speech, but they show it in their actions; at least my Nathan does, an' my impression is that Joe's wife—Sally her name is—doesna ken Joe yet. He 'll no' ha'e met her half-road, as it were, an' gi'en her a chance o' gettin' to the bedrock, an' she tak's his quateness for indifference; an' the upshot is, as ye see, that for the best pairt o' a year she 's as happy in Brighton as he is in Thornhill, an' for the rest they put up wi' yin anither for the sake o' the siller their united efforts bring in. Ay, it 's a queer world for some folk. But I 'm deavin' ye. Joe 'll be oot o' a job, too, an' to keep him richt I maun keep him workin' the day;' and she bustled off to encourage Joe in well-doing.

Later I consulted with Betty about Murray Monteith's visit, and we arranged to get the south bedroom prepared for his reception. So

I wrote him to-day at some length, extending Betty's invitation, and expressing my willingness to accompany him to Nithbank House. After I had finished my letter I perambulated the dining-room round and round, for the day was wet and boisterous, and I could not go out of doors. Bang and Jip, evidently conscious of the fact that a walk was out of the question, were making themselves at home on the hearth-rug, and I was just finishing half a mile of carpet-walking when the street door opened, and Nathan's step sounded in the lobby. Betty had gone out on an errand, so I went ben to the kitchen.

'Hallo, Nathan!' I said; 'have you got a holiday to-day?'

Nathan looked up at me as he sat down in his arm-chair near the fire. 'I've ta'en yin, Maister Weelum,' he said. 'I've ta'en yin—very much against the grain, though. I'm —I'm no' feelin' very weel, so I thocht I wad juist come hame.'

'You did well to come home, Nathan, and I'm sorry to know you are not up to the mark. You're cold-looking. Do you feel cold?'

'Weel, shivery weys, Maister Weelum; shivery weys. Imphm!—Where's Betty?'

I told him she had gone out on an errand,

but would be back presently; and, going into the dining-room, I poured out a glass of brandy and brought it to him. 'Here, Nathan. I know your mind on the liquor question; but put aside your objections and drink this. It will do you good.'

He smiled feebly. 'What would Betty say? Will ye tak' the blame?' he asked.

'Certainly I'll take the blame, or, rather, I should say the credit. Drink it up now, Nathan.'

Joe, who had been splitting firewood in the stick-house, had recognised his brother's voice, and came into the kitchen. 'It is you, Nathan!' he said, in surprise. 'It's no' often we see you wi' a dram-gless in your hand, an' at this time o' day, too. My word, but you're lucky!'

'Ay, Benjy, it is me, an' I am lucky. I daur say ye wad like to chum wi' me the noo. Are—are ye still keepin' the teetotal?'

For a moment Joe looked shamefacedly at Nathan; then truth and honour—outstanding traits of the Hebrons—shone in his eye. 'No,' he said; 'I broke it this mornin'.'

'Ay—imphm! And hoo did you come to do that?' asked Nathan, without looking round.

'Betty tempted me, and I fell.'

'Oh, imphm! Betty gied ye a dram, did she? Weel, Benjy, whatever Betty did was richt. She didna tempt ye, man; she treated ye, that's what she did. Ye'll no' gang far wrang if ye're guided by Betty.—Eh, Maister Weelum?'

He was sitting very near the fire, with his long gnarled fingers spread out for warmth, and he looked up sideways to me when he said this with a look in his blue eyes which told me, more pointedly than words, of his absolute confidence in her good judgment, and the pride he had in the possession of her love.

CHAPTER XIII.

ONE of my city friends who is interested in the study of phrenology once told me that my bump of adaptability is very strongly developed. He told me more, of which I was sceptical; but the natural ease with which I have taken to and conformed with my present surroundings is proof to me that his interpretation of this particular bump was fairly correct. Words fail me to express adequately the pleasure I have derived from my reintroduction to Nature's home and mine. Everything seems fresh from the hand of the Creator; there is no veneer, no make-believe, and over all there is solace and repose. Happy hours in the domestic atmosphere of the old house, mellowed and sweetened by the presence of Betty and Nathan; the quiet interval spent in the barber's back sanctum, with its window facing the gray-blue Lowthers; the afternoon visit to John Sterling's shop, with its homely smell of roset and bend-leather, and our usual discussion on the Dandie breed and the beauties of Scott's *Marmion*, Aird's *Devil's Dream*, and Hogg's *Kilmeny;* a stroll with Bang and Jip

round the Gillfoot or down the 'Coo Road;' and solitary meditation on the doctor's 'mound,' surrounded by a medley of vegetation, planted indiscriminately and flourishing under what the dear old man calls his natural style of gardening—such is my daily programme. A homely life this amidst homely folks: the barber in his reminiscent moods; John Sterling with his love of dogs, his charitableness and honesty, and his enthusiasm for what I may call the true poetry of life; Dr Grierson, walking alone, hugging to his heart a sweet secret memory, dreein' his weird, doing good in his own quiet way, and keeping from his left hand what his right hand is doing; Nathan, silent, serious, and preoccupied, deferring ever to Betty, and proud and content to shelter in her shadow; and Betty, my dear, kind, thoughtful Betty, who always carves with the blunt knife and the big heart, whose Bible is her bolster, and whose solicitude extends to all God's creatures great and small—homely folks of a surety; yes, commonplace, if you will, but dear to my heart. It may be—in fact, I may take it for granted—that characters like these would make no appeal to my city acquaintances; to them association with such would be boredom, and my mode of living the essence of dreariness; and yet to me, and I

say it with all reverence, it comes as near as anything on earth can come to that peace which passeth all understanding.

Mention of Betty and her Bible in the same breath reminds me that lately she has talked to me almost solely on secular matters. This is not as it used to be. When first I came to her, by a process of manœuvring and meandering peculiar to herself she always managed to steer her conversation into religious channels, and the direct way she had of pointing the moral was always original and characteristic. It is not because I have discouraged her or shown any indifference that she has lapsed in this matter; and it would appear that, as our intimacy has ripened, and as our topics of conversation have become more personal, she has meantime allowed the mundane to prevail, with a view to taking up the more serious and essential at a more convenient season.

I wasn't surprised, therefore, when, to-day, after Dr Grierson had visited Nathan in the back-room, she asked him in an off-hand, matter-of-fact way what he thought of yesterday's sermon.

The doctor was fumbling in his pocket for his old clay, and in an absent, abstracted tone of voice he informed her that, as he hadn't

been to church, he wasn't in a position to pass any judgment.

'Ay, ye werena at the kirk? I micht ha'e kenned that,' she said. 'Imphm! I'm no' a deid auld woman, doctor,' she continued; 'but I mind o' your faither efter he left Dumfries an' cam' to bide wi' ye here, an' he was a regular attender at the kirk. It's a great pity when folks break off kin'. Ay, that it is! Imphm! An', doctor, you'll excuse me, it's mebbe nae business o' mine; but I canna help tellin' ye that I often think aboot ye, an' that ye lie heavy on my mind. We've seen a great deal o' ye lately, mair than we ever saw before, and I've proved to mysel' what ithers said o' ye, an' what I had aye ta'en for granted. It's a' in your favour, an' what ye've dune for the puir God will no' forget when ye're bein' weighed in the balance.'

'Thank you, Betty,' the doctor said, as he struck a light.

'Ay, but haud on; I havena dune wi' ye. I havena come to the point. As I've said, ye've come a great deal in an' oot among us lately, an' in a temporal sense ye've been a great comfort and help to Maister Weelum here. Oh that ye had been able to influence him spiritually, for since he cam' he's never darkened a kirk door. I've held my tongue,

as sae far there 's been an excuse for him ; but noo that he 's gettin' better an' able to gang aboot, I juist think that oot o' respect for you, if ye had been kirk-minded, he could easily ha'e been guided Zionward.'

I had the feeling that Betty was rushing in where angels fear to tread ; and, not knowing how the doctor was likely to take this, I became very uncomfortable. He puffed spasmodically at his pipe and moved uneasily in his chair. 'It is very kind of you, Betty, to think of me,' he said—'very kind indeed ; and you must not count it none of your business to bring such matters before me. In a way we are all each other's keepers, and it would be churlish of me to resent such interest as you show. For my own part, I live my life according to my light, such as it is. It may be a poor, flickering light to other eyes, but it is sufficient to show me the road. As for William here, he has long ago reached man's estate, and he can judge of these matters for himself. If I mistake not, he has a standard of his own, and I feel sure my influence, even though I were kirk-minded, as you call it, would not direct his steps in the direction you indicate.'

'Oh doctor, dinna say that ! We can a' be made humble instruments. Example is a great

thing, though ye dinna follow your faither's, an' I ken what a power for guid ye wad be if the grace o' God was in ye. Oh doctor, I 've been he'rt sorry for ye mony a time, for I ken the grief ye 've carried, an' I 've wondered hoo ye could thole it sae lang a' by yoursel', an' that ye never accepted the consolation which He alone can gi'e ye. But ye 've spurned it, doctor. I don't think that ye 're a joined member o' the kirk or that ye gang to the Communion—you that 's sic a man i' the toon—everybody's body as you are, an' born wi' a sma'er dose o' original sin than ony yin I ken o'. I juist canna understan' it.'

The doctor laughed good-humouredly. 'I 've my work to attend to, you know, Betty. My patients cannot be neglected for the sake of'——

'If your work permitted, wad ye gang to the kirk, doctor?'

'I—I question if I would.'

'That 's an honest admission, an' it wadna come frae Dr Grierson if it wasna. An' what 's your objection, doctor?'

'Oh, well, Betty, your question opens up a big, debatable subject on which I have great reluctance to enter. I have neither the time nor the inclination, Betty; but this much I will say, we are all heirs to a heritage of

different distresses in this life, and as we are not all constituted alike we require different treatment. Now there is one great panacea, one great balm, for all our wounds. Some find that panacea in their church, though many go to church who are not aware they require a panacea. Others, of whom I am one, find a balm for their afflictions in communing with the nature of God's creation we see around us. With such it isn't necessary to go to church in order to feel God's presence or to experience His beneficent power. If it were, we could only commune with Him once a week, when the churches are open. As it is, I can praise Him at all times, and glorify His name under the canopy of His heavens, and among the trees and flowers and fields and woods, which evidence His fostering care and proclaim His loving-kindness.'

'Then, doctor, ye do believe in God?'

A pained look crept into the doctor's eyes. 'Betty,' he said, 'you surely have never doubted that?'

'Weel, wi' you no' gaun to the kirk, an''——

'Ah, Betty, it is possible for a man to go to church and remain in doubt; but no one can stand, as I often do, under the starry firmament, alone in the midst of slumbering nature,

or facing the glowing east when the shafts of the sun's morning beams are piercing the shadowy sky, and not feel within himself that God reigneth, and the earth in consequence rejoices.'

'Grand! Man, doctor, I'm glad to hear ye say that! I'm—I'm rale glad.'

There was a wee bit catch in Betty's voice, and a tear trickled down her cheek, which she tried to wipe away unnoticed with a corner of her apron. But the doctor saw, and his face twitched and softened.

'Then, doctor,' she continued, 'of course ye'll believe in the Bible?'

'Yes—with reservations.'

'Which means, doctor?'

'Well, Betty, it means that—— Wait now, I want to make it easy for you to understand; but unfortunately, by doing so, it makes it all the more difficult for me to explain. Well, in a word, Betty, it means there are parts of it I believe, and there are others I cannot.'

'Ay, pairts ye believe an' pairts ye canna believe. I notice ye say ye *canna* believe; ye don't say ye *will not* believe. There's a difference, doctor, ye ken. Why do ye say ye canna?'

'Because I have thought out things very carefully, very anxiously, and I cannot entertain

what does not appeal to my reason. I must discard what I think is wrong.'

'But, doctor, man, ye maunna exercise your ain judgment. It's human; consequently it's weak. What ye want is faith—the faith which can remove mountains, the faith which sustains. Doctor, ye must put aside your ain vain imaginin's an' thochts, an' become as a little child. Ay, juist as a little child.'

'Yes, Betty, I thought you would say that. But you know I am not a little child. I am a man, a responsible, thinking being, endowed by God with a reasoning faculty which is calculated to guide me, and which, Betty, I am expected to exercise. I cannot accept anything temporal which is diametrically opposed or contrary to my judgment, nor would I in the discharge of my professional duties follow a course or accept a condition which my intellect and discernment told me was wrong. Why, then, should I, in this the greatest of all questions, be expected to lay reason aside and acquiesce in blind belief? No, Betty, I cannot do that. If I did I shouldn't be true to myself.'

'But, doctor, wi' due respect, let me tell ye that cleverer men than you have thocht these things oot for themselves an' have been satisfied wi' the Word as it is delivered.

Think o' the Reformers an' a' oor professors, men who have studied theology a' their days, an''——

'And after all their study, what do they know, what have they gleaned from all their books? I cannot be guided even by professors. They know as much or as little of God's workings as the man who sweeps our village street. Now, Betty, further than this I cannot and will not go with you. As I have said, it is a big, debatable subject, and we might talk till doomsday and not agree even then. Besides, it is a very dangerous thing to tamper with any one's belief, especially if that belief affords a solace in trials and constitutes an anchor in the storm. You have got something within you which calms your fears, and gives you a peace which nothing else can. Stick to it, Betty, and guard it against assault. And I—well, Betty, I also have something within me which gives me peace, such peace as would remain with me even if to-night I was called upon to turn my face to the wall. Ah, Betty, each and every one has a faith. The world has never been without one, and it will have one to the end. But my conviction is we haven't often enough taken stock of our faith, and the consequence is it has become detached from and out of

sympathy with our workaday lives. What a different world it would be if we were living our religion instead of professing it! Some say this is impossible. Well, it ought to be made possible, and the best way of going about it would be to strip religion of all that binds it to impossible, out-of-date dogmas, clear it of all that confounds and mystifies, and nail as a motto to its mast-head these glorious words of the great Master, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." Betty, the time is at hand when the Church will be forced to consider this text—ay, and to act upon it; and when that day dawns it will herald the Millennium.'

A strange hush had fallen upon the room while the doctor was speaking, and when he ceased it lingered with us like a benediction. Then Betty walked quietly over to the window. 'Doctor,' she said, after a pause, 'd' ye think, at the last, everybody will be—eh—a' richt?'

'Well, Betty, the question often occurs to me. When the boundlessness of God's love comes home to me I think it is possible. There is a verse, the thirteenth of the twenty-first chapter of the Revelation, which'——

At that moment a knock came to the door, and Betty slipped out. In her absence the

doctor smoked in silence, and I watched the fire glowing in the grate.

'Doctor,' she said, as she re-entered, 'that's the grocer's boy. Somebody telt him ye were here, and he wants to ken if the bottle o' port wine ye ordered is for Mrs Lawson o' Gillhead or auld Widow Lawson?'

'Oh, it is for Widow Lawson,' he replied, and the semblance of a blush spread over his face. He rose hurriedly, adjusted his plaid, and picked up his hat.

I put my hand on his arm as he passed me. 'Doctor,' I said, 'your good deeds are finding you out;' and he shook his head, and smiled as if he didn't understand me, but he made no reply.

Betty came into my room later with her Bible in her hand. 'I've been lookin' up that verse in the Revelation,' she said, 'an' it reads: "On the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates." Ay—imphm! I never saw the maitter in that licht before.—Weel, I trust there may be a gate for me, Maister Weelum; an'—an' somewey I'm sure noo there's yin for the doctor.'

CHAPTER XIV.

IN accordance with the doctor's orders, Nathan has not been to work these past few days; and though, beyond admitting a 'wakeness aboot the knees' and a proneness to 'shiverin',' he makes no specific complaint, I have noticed that daily he becomes more beholden to Betty, and that he very willingly goes off to bed a good two hours earlier than his usual retiring-time.

There are some who, by their very backwardness and reticence, attract attention and excite curiosity. I have met many such, both professionally and socially, and the breaking down of their reserve has always been interesting; but, than the case of Nathan Hebron, none has more substantially repaid the time and trouble which the process of thawing involved. To outsiders I presume Nathan is an enigma. Not so to us who live with him. I needn't attempt to explain the feeling of confidence which he inspires, or the peculiar power which he unconsciously exerts in our little household circle. Words cannot convey it—it must be experienced to be understood; and

though Betty is always to the fore, always taking the initiative, I know she feels that somewhere in the background, almost outwith her immediate knowledge, but ever in her reckoning, is the force, the power, the quiet, unobtrusive, dependable Nathan. And yet, strange to say, could I probe to the quick of his feelings, I know I should find that, in his 'stablished estimation, Betty, and Betty alone, stands for everything that the term 'bulwark and tower of strength' conveys.

Of late I have been wondering how best I can advance Nathan's worldly interests and lighten his burden without taking him away altogether from the calling of his choice. Somehow I don't think he would be happy without a spade in his hand and denied access to leaf-mould. He is too old to fit into a new groove, and I must remember that were I, even with the best intentions, carefully to uproot an old tree from amongst the shadows and replant it in the sunshine it would surely die. Still, I should like to do something to make his gloaming life easier. I have often felt sorry for him, leaving his comfortable house on inclement mornings, working his day's darg, and returning when darkness had long settled down. Outdoor work under favourable weather conditions is agreeable

enough; but when it is carried on under a cold, leaden sky, amidst frost and snow, and in biting winds, it is stripped of much of its pleasure and poetry. Thinking in this strain, the idea came to me that I might erect glass-houses in our garden here, and encourage Nathan to devote the whole of his time to the cultivation of tomatoes. I have already mentioned my scheme to the doctor, and he approves of it; but I have said nothing to Betty or Nathan. I must see to it one of these days.

I had a long, pleasant ramble this afternoon. The air was clear and invigorating; I was feeling braced up and buoyant; and as for Jip and Bang, I never saw them in a more sportive, energetic mood. We walked through Rashbrigs Moss, past Dabton Loch, and round by Longmire, where I called and spent an hour with Farmer Russell. Bang killed a rat in the steading just before we left, and he wagged his stumpy tail and tried to raise his tattered ear all the way home. The dogs preceded me into the house, and I stumbled after them through the darkened lobby and into the darker dining-room.

'Hallo, Betty,' I said as I entered; 'not lit up yet?'

Betty was over at the window in the act

of pulling down the blind, which, strangely enough, she always does before she lights the gas.

'Oh, it's you, Maister Weelum,' she said. 'It's that dark I can scarcely see ye;' but she continued standing inactive, looking round at me with the window-blind cord hanging loose in her hand. The firelight was low, and the light which came through the window from the village lamp across the street made the darkness only more visible. I could make Betty out, silhouetted as she was against the window; but, though all around was in black shadow which my eyes could not penetrate, I had the feeling that some one else was present. As I peered around, a tall visionary figure moved to my right, and Betty came toward me from the window.

'This is Miss Stuart,' she said, 'the lady that's pentin' wee Isobel Jardine's picter. She's been workin' at it a' efternoon. I was tellin' her aboot your new yin, an' I asked her in to see it.—An', Miss Stuart, this is my boy—my wean I used to ca' him—Maister Weelum, or raither, as I should say, Maister Russell. Mrs Jardine an' me were tellin' ye aboot him. Imphm!' And as Betty breathlessly finished her introduction, and, without further ado, turned to break the

fire into a glow, Miss Stuart and I gravely bowed.

I couldn't see our visitor's face, but her figure was strangely familiar to me, and my pulse quickened.

'Miss Stuart,' said Betty, 'will ye please sit here till I licht the gas?' and she wheeled the easy-chair, which usually stands opposite mine, within the radius of the glow from the fire.

'Oh, thank you very much, Mrs Hebron,' said a voice I knew well; 'but I'm afraid I must be going. I'll—I'll not sit down, thank you. Mr Russell will be'——

'Delighted to see you seated, Miss Stuart,' I interposed. 'I have very few lady visitors these days, and I do assure you you are welcome.'

'Eh! that's weel said, Maister Weelum,' Betty chimed in; 'and it's true too.—Ye canna but sit doon, if it's only to please him, no' to speak o' me;' and, as Miss Stuart graciously complied, she bustled out to the kitchen for a match.

In her absence I struck a light and lit the gas, and as Miss Stuart's eyes met mine we both smiled. Nathan on one occasion winked to me, and in doing so he established a paction between us. In the same way, but more emphatically, this smile awakened a feeling of camaraderie, a consciousness that the Fates

were playing with us, and that we recognised the success of their manipulations.

'Betty has been talking to me a good deal about you lately, Miss Stuart,' I said as I drew in my chair. 'Somehow, from the first I associated you, the subject of her talk and the painter of Isobel's portrait, with my good Samaritan of Nithbank Wood; and I am not surprised to find that I was right.'

'Indeed, Mr Russell!' she said, and again she smiled. 'Well, I have been hearing about you also of late from both Mrs Hebron and Mrs Jardine; and, like you, I am'—— But before she could finish her sentence Betty re-entered with a lighted taper, and in its warm yellow glow her face shone like a radiant moon.

'Ah, Maister Weelum,' she said, 'for aince ye've managed that "perverted" licht. Thae newfangled things are fashious, an' it's a cauld-lookin' licht; but there's economy in it, Miss Stuart—imphm! An', my me! excuse me, miss, but it does my he'rt guid to see ye sittin' in that chair.' And in a flash my mind went back to our crack, and I remembered her words, 'It's a gey comfortable-lookin' chair, that yin opposite ye, Maister Weelum; an', d'ye ken, I met a leddy the day that I wad like to see sittin' in it.'

'Betty,' I said, 'Miss Stuart and I are not altogether strangers; we have met once or twice in an informal way; but, now that we have been brought together to-night, under your auspices, don't you think—just to signalise the event—you might offer her a cup of tea?'

'Eh, Maister Weelum! you read me like a book. I was juist gaun to suggest that. The kettle's at the boil, an' it'll no' tak' me a meenit. Will—will I bring doon the tea-set frae the drawin'-room—your mother's, ye ken?'

'Yes, yes, Betty, if you please; and Miss Stuart will honour us in handseling it. It hasn't been used since I came here;' and before my guest could say 'Yea' or 'Nay,' Betty had disappeared.

I drew the chair nearer the fire, and, pipe in hand, was about to ask my *vis-à-vis* if I might smoke, when I saw her gaze wander round the walls of my room and ultimately rest on my picture.

'Oh, Mr Russell,' she exclaimed, as she rose to her feet—'why, that is surely the picture I painted?'

'It is, Miss Stuart,' I quietly said. 'It's the picture you had just finished the first time I saw you in the flesh, and I assure you I am very proud to be the possessor of it.'

She stood looking up at it, beating a tattoo

with her fingers on the table, and I saw the warm blood mounting her neck and cheek.

'I hope you don't mind my having it?' I asked.

'Oh no; but—well, you must have put yourself to some trouble to get it—more than it's worth, I'm afraid, for it was presented to a bazaar many miles away; and, you'll pardon me, but I cannot understand your putting so much value on it. It is really not a good bit of work, though the subject appealed to me so much.'

'Now, Miss Stuart, please do not belittle my purchase—your labour of love, I may call it. I know a little about art; in fact, though I don't paint now, it has always been, and still is, my hobby, and in my judgment you have no reason to be ashamed of this example of your handiwork. As to my motive in buying it—well, I am a native of this village, as Betty has perhaps already told you, and to me it and its environs will ever be my earthly paradise. I know every step of the countryside around. As a boy I hunted in its fields, explored its woods, and fished its streams. During the years I have been settled in Edinburgh, never a day has passed but my thoughts have strayed homeward, and the identical spot on which you sketched this picture is the one, above all others,

around which my most hallowed memories are centred. Whenever I thought of my quiet village home my mind meandered down the Gillfoot road, and the view which inspired you to this effort has always been with me, for it is, as it were, photographed on my brain.'

'Oh, I quite understand you,' she said slowly —'quite. But how did you find out where it was for sale?'

'Well, I had very little difficulty in that,' I laughingly replied. 'Talking of sales, though —pardon my introducing the commercial element into our conversation, Miss Stuart—but I would like very much to have a companion picture to this one, something local of course. I'll leave the price to yourself. There's no hurry, you know; only I should be sorry to miss the opportunity of procuring another, treated with the same loving skill.'

'How much did you pay for this one?' she asked, with a twinkle in her eye.

'Well—I—I really cannot tell you exactly. You see, I didn't buy it myself. I happened to hear your clerical friend say something about the Laurieston bazaar; so I wrote to Ormskirk, my confidential clerk, giving him the few particulars I possessed, and he managed everything to my satisfaction. The price he paid for it will be noted down: he stated it in

his letter, but as it was of minor importance I don't remember the exact figure.'

I had risen from my chair when she stood up to examine the picture; and, thinking she might be tired standing, I asked her to sit down. She made no response, however; and, lost in thought, looked long into the glowing fire.

'Ormskirk! Mr Ormskirk, your confidential clerk!' she repeated slowly. 'The name seems familiar to me. Oh yes, now I remember;' and she laughed cheerily, and gave me a blithe look. 'It is a coincidence, Mr Russell; but I was received once by a Mr Ormskirk of an Edinburgh legal firm. The name struck me as being unusual.'

'Well, Miss Stuart, so far as I know there is only one Ormskirk in our profession in Edinburgh, and he is with us—my firm, I mean—Monteith & Russell.'

'Monteith & Russell!' she repeated. 'And you are'——

'Well, I'm Mr Monteith's partner.'

She looked at me with surprise in her big dark eyes, and then slowly every vestige of colour left her face. 'You—you are Mr Russell! Oh, I am so glad to meet you! I have corresponded with you, and my father very often spoke of you. I am Désirée Stuart.

My affairs are in your firm's hands. I am the daughter of General Stuart of Abereran. This is very bewildering!' and she smiled feebly through moist, lustrous eyes.

I was too astonished to speak. No suitable words could I utter in acknowledgment of this unexpected information. Never for a moment had I associated Miss Stuart the artist with Miss Stuart of Abereran. Somehow, I cannot say exactly what followed; but I have a dim recollection of hearing her apologising for sobbing, on the plea that I was the first person she had met since her father's death of whom, in his last illness, he had spoken with kindliness and affectionate regard. And I welcomed this with avidity as another link which bound me to her.

'Your father and I didn't meet often, Miss Stuart,' I said, after a pause, during which we had both been busy in thought; 'but we corresponded very frequently. I am glad to know he spoke of me with appreciation. Unfortunately I was confined to bed at the time of his death, otherwise I should have been with you; but my partner, Mr Murray Monteith, attended to everything, and has been giving your affairs every consideration.'

'Yes, Mr Monteith has been very attentive. I called at your office and asked to see you. It

was on this occasion I met your Mr Ormskirk. Well, Mr Monteith received me, and reassured me on one or two points about which I was anxious. After all, I didn't tell him the real reason of my visit.'

'Indeed! And—and why didn't you?'

'Well, I somehow didn't like. I know it was very silly; but I just couldn't speak of it—at least to him.'

'Oh, I'm sorry to know that!' I said. 'Mr Monteith would have been only too pleased to help you with his advice. Is the matter you wished to bring before me still of consequence?'

'Yes. But it can wait. You know this is neither the time nor the place to talk business. Besides, I oughtn't to bother you about my affairs just now. You are still on the sick list, though I must say you look less the invalid to-day than you did the first time I saw you.'

'Thank you, Miss Stuart. I am glad to know I look better; certainly I feel much stronger, and I trust to be back to business soon. But do tell me now what you wanted to consult me about in Edinburgh.'

For a time she remained silent, and I watched with interest the run and play of her thoughts, as expressed in her mobile face.

'Don't you think,' she said at length, 'that

all this is very queer—I mean our previous accidental meetings, the personal and business connection between us, and the fact of our sitting together in this room in this quiet little village? I feel we are known to each other, yet we are not acquainted. Oh, it does seem so strange and unusual!'

'Yes. The whole circumstances are rather remarkable, and I could tell you something—a little story in which you and I figure, which is even more mystifying; but we are wandering from the subject we had on hand. You haven't yet told me what I wish to know.'

'I cannot mention it to-night, Mr Russell,' she said. 'More than ever I feel I ought not to have broached it. Later I trust we shall have an opportunity of discussing everything. You don't mind my deferring it?'

'Just as you wish; but before we dismiss business, may I ask you a question?'

'Certainly.'

'Well, I had a letter from Mr Monteith the other day in which he referred to your affairs. By the same token, he is coming down to see your aunt, so we 'll all meet and go into everything thoroughly. Well, what he mentioned in his letter with reference to you set me a-thinking, and I have been wondering since if you are aware of the fact that you hold four

thousand Banku oil shares. Have you received any dividends lately?'

'I know,' she answered thoughtfully, 'that father, some time ago—when I came of age it was—transferred some shares to me, and from time to time he gave me what must have been dividends. I didn't trouble him for particulars; he always hated business chats, but more so after his last visit to India. I am sure he got a touch of sun, although the doctor would never admit it, and I purposely refrained from referring to business affairs, as it only annoyed and irritated him. Since he died I have received no money at all. As a matter of fact'—and she blushed painfully—'that's what I wanted to see you about. Aunt is awfully decent, and grudges me nothing; but surely I ought to have received something. It isn't very nice to be depending on her for every shilling, and—you understand, Mr Russell?—I'm perhaps too independent, and'——

'Oh, Miss Stuart, I am so sorry! This is a most unfortunate oversight. I must rectify it at once, and see that money is sent to you to-morrow. You have quite a large sum to your credit with us.'

'I am glad to know that;' and she smiled. 'But please don't put yourself to any immediate trouble on my account. I—I am all right for

money at present. Unknown to my aunt, I sent two of my pictures to Glasgow last week. Yesterday I received—what do you think?—four guineas each for them;' and again the blood mounted to her cheek.

'Miss Stuart,' I said, in consternation, 'have you through our thoughtlessness been obliged to'—— I didn't finish my sentence, for at that moment the door opened, and Betty entered with the tea-tray. Maybe it was a fortunate, certain I am it was a timely, interruption, as I was strongly tempted to act unprofessionally, and take a client to my arms.

We had tea brewed in my mother's old Worcester teapot and served in dainty cups of the same ware. The modern gas was extinguished, and the candles in the candelabra w re lit. Nobody in Thornhill, or out of it, can bake soda-scones to compare with Betty's; no one can approach her in the lightness and pan-flavour of her toothsome pancakes, the 'gou' of her butter, and the aroma of her home-blended tea. As for her homely, kindly presence—well, only one other possessed its match, and she was sitting at Betty's right hand, admiring my mother's old china, praising Betty's scones, filling my heart with a gladness it had never known before. Ah, Betty Grier—my dear old Betty—I owe much to you!

Before life was a reality to me, you cared for me and ministered to my wants. When I was cast adrift from moorings of my own making you took me in, nursed me, and tended me. For all this I thank you; but for bringing this little tea-party about I'll bless your name for ever and ever. Amen.

So far I have not been out of doors after nightfall. The village streets are not too well lit; the pavements are too uneven for my uncertain steps; but Miss Stuart couldn't go home unattended. Betty was very emphatic on this point, and of course I heartily concurred. Bang and Jip certainly came into the house with me after our walk; but they must have recognised in Miss Stuart a counter-attraction, and slipped away to their respective homes unobserved. Standing in the lobby with my coat and hat on, and thinking they might be keeping Nathan company in his back-room, I called to them several times, but all in vain; so Miss Stuart and I went out alone.

It was a clear, quiet, moonlight night, with that sharp touch of frost in the air which makes walking a pleasure. No winter night winds sighed in the bare, leafless limes as we passed down the street; no discordant sounds broke the stillness of the Gillfoot as we wended our way by its shadowy wood.

I had, of course, perforce to walk slowly, and in some unaccountable way my thoughts and speech seemed to keep in rhythm with my steps. This at first disturbed and annoyed me, as I was anxious to be vivacious and animated; but I soon found out that in certain circumstances conversation is not essential to good-fellowship.

When we reached the top of the Gillfoot Brae, and were almost opposite the little wicket to Nithbank Wood, we halted for a minute, and in silence looked down upon the scene, the natural features of which my companion had with such loving skill transferred to her canvas.

There are times when Nature asserts herself —thrusts herself, as it were, upon us, and emphatically proclaims her glory and power. It is good for us to come under her dominance then, for if we have within us a soul worthy of the name we cannot but feel our true position and standing in the great Creator's plan.

As I stood, with the woman I loved beside me, on that glamour-haunted spot, amidst scenes grand in their solemnity and hallowed by associations, myriads of twinkling worlds above us, at our feet peaceful howmes all bathed in moonlight, a fuller realisation of the true import of life was borne in upon me.

And there, in a consciously chastened spirit, with Nature's sermon in my heart and her inspirations all around me, I turned to my companion, and falteringly told the story of my dream.

In silence and with wonderment in her eyes, she listened to all my heart bade me say, and when I had finished she slightly turned away from me, and her head was bowed. Then in a flash my mind reverted to her recent bereavement; and when I thought of her loneliness and isolation, the uncertainty of her prospects, and the shame and mental trials she would in all probability be called upon to bear, reproach came to me, and I felt selfish and mean in adding to her burden of mind.

'Miss Stuart,' I said, 'please pardon me if I have said anything amiss, or if what I have spoken is unwelcome or ill-timed, and a cause of unhappiness to you. If it is so, I am deeply sorry, but I cannot take back anything I have told you. God knows it is true, and my whole life will be devoted to prove to you that it is so. But for the present—well, doubtless you have plenty to think about, so please dismiss from your mind what I have said. If I may, I shall some day speak to you again. Meanwhile let me be your friend. Somehow, I think you need one.'

She looked gratefully at me with moistened eyes. 'Thank you very much. What you have told me is all so strange, so unexpected, and—and I feel it is all true. You are very kind. I do need a friend, and I can trust you.'

. . . . . .

I am lying in my old truckle-bed. It is far into the morning, and sleep has not yet closed my eyes. Nathan has not been so well to-night, and his restlessness has kept Betty astir, but it hasn't disturbed me. And, somehow, I am not lonely. 'I do need a friend, and I can trust you;' these words, during the quiet hours, are often being whispered in my ear, and I would rather remain awake and hear them than slip into slumberland and lose them.

CHAPTER XV.

FOR the first time since I was a boy, Betty had to waken me this morning. As a rule I lie for half-an-hour before getting up, allowing my mind to simmer over the events of the previous day, and planning how best I may spend the coming forenoon and afternoon. I had no need to make out any programme for to-day, however, as I had that all arranged last night.

I dressed hurriedly, and after spending a few minutes with Nathan, who, poor man, is abed, I sent off a telegram to Murray Monteith, requesting him to wire on receipt one hundred pounds on Miss Stuart's account to the local bank. When I had breakfasted I wrote him a long letter, and asked him to send me particulars regarding her interests in the Banku Oil Company. Then I went up and arranged with Mr Crichton the banker as to her account.

Walking along to the bank, I met Joe on his way down to Betty's. Joe's jacket is always closely buttoned, and he wears his tweed cap tilted on his head at the same angle as he would

his glengarry when on parade. His hair is cropped short, the forelock brushed firmly and obliquely across his left temple, and showing prominently under the stem of his civilian cap. His trousers are always carefully pressed; consequently they never show a bagginess at the knees. He is not so tall as Nathan, nor has he the 'boss' appearance; but I fancied that to-day he had more than usual of the same serious Hebron expression; and when he gave me the salute, as he always does in true soldierly style, it wasn't accompanied by the customary cheery smile. He passed me at the regulation step, and from the fact that he was carrying a brown-paper bag bearing the name of John Nelson, Fruiterer, I surmised that Betty was contemplating an apple-dumpling for dinner.

My business with Mr Crichton was soon disposed of; but it took me some considerable time to dispose of Mr Crichton. He has a jocose, affable way with him, a pawky knack of leaving one subject and starting another; and when he is in a reminiscent mood, as he was this morning, he can be very dreich and very entertaining at one and the same time. Long ago, of an evening, he used to play chess with my father. He took snuff in those days—he takes snuff still, and treats others unstintingly,

as Betty will know when my handkerchief goes to the wash—and when my father had lured him into an awkward position on the board his little silver box was seldom out of his hand. My recollection of him at that period is very hazy, and it is so closely associated with this box that it may be if he hadn't snuffed I shouldn't have remembered him at all. I notice he applies the stimulant always to his right nostril, never to the left, and he has a dainty and a stealthy way of conveying the pinch which contrasts strongly with that of Deacon Webster, whose recklessness where snuff is concerned is such that more is distributed on his shirt-front and waistcoat than is sniffed into the nasal receptacle. On the other hand, so cleanly and dapper is Mr Crichton that, were it not for the aroma of Kendal brown which ever lingers about him, you wouldn't know he used snuff at all.

After a couthie crack, which, in spite of my preoccupation, I enjoyed, I said good-bye and walked out of the bank, only to fall a ready prey to the blandishments of Douglas the barber, who inveigled me into his back-yard to see a cavie of Wyandotte chickens of which, as prize-winners, he had great expectations. Then, in his draughty lobby, I had to listen to an account of his first and only interview with

Thomas Carlyle at Holmhill, of his photographing the Chelsea seer and 'snoddin'' his hair; also to a résumé of a lecture on the Ruthwell Cross he had heard delivered by our fellow-villager, Dr Hewison, which pleased him, as he said, 'doon to the nines.' On reaching home I found, to my great disappointment, that Dr Grierson had called and had gone away. I wanted particularly to see the doctor, as I felt he should know that I had taken his advice and unburdened my mind to the lady of my dream.

When Betty came in to lay the table for my homely midday meal I noticed she was not quite herself, and that there was something unusual disquieting her mind. As I have said, I always allow her to unburden herself to me in her own way and at her own sweet will; but somehow I intuitively felt that in the present circumstances my rule should not apply.

As she moved silently out and in I watched her closely, and when she had finished and drawn out my chair from the table I put my hand on her shoulder. 'Betty,' I said, 'there is a sadness in your eyes to-day I have never noticed before. Is there anything worrying you?'

She looked up at me for a moment; then,

putting her arms round my neck, she began to cry, quietly but emotionally. 'Oh, it's Nathan, puir falla, an' I'm sairly putten aboot,' she said between her sobs. 'It strikes me he's no' in a very guid wey; an', oh Weelum! if—if ocht tak's Nathan I dinna want to live.'

It was the first time for years she had, unasked, called me 'Weelum' without the prefix, and the old familiar way she pronounced it touched a chord in my heart.

I let her have her cry out, and then I did my best to allay her fears. She sat down on my chair, and I drew in another and sat down beside her. 'Nathan's not very well, Betty,' I said; 'but he's always been a healthy enough man, not given to complaining and lying about, and you know you're so accustomed to see him strong and robust that you are apt to exaggerate anything which prostrates him and keeps him in bed. The doctor's not concerned about him to-day, is he?'

'I—I dinna ken for certain. He didna say so to me, but I imagined he looked that wey,' she said. 'Mebbe I read his face wrang. I'm trustin' I did, but—but I see for mysel' that Nathan's far frae weel.'

'Yes, Betty, we all know that; but I'm sure

there 's nothing serious. He 's got a bad cold, a very bad chill, the doctor tells me; but with a good rest in bed and careful nursing he 'll soon be up and about again.'

'I 'm dootin' it 's mair than a chill, Maister Weelum,' and she shook her head; 'an' it strikes me that Nathan kens it 's something mair serious. He 's tryin' no' to let on to me; but the mair he tries the clearer I see it. Ay, him an' me have come to that time o' life when we depend a guid deal on yin anither, an' lately I 've noticed that he 's been anxious to do mair for me than he 's able. We lippen on yin anither in a quiet kind o' a wey, ye ken —never askin' or demandin', but aye expectin', an' aye gettin'. Ay, Maister Weelum, aye gettin' an' aye gi'in', an' it 's through this wee peep-hole that Nathan an' me, an' ithers happily married like us, get a wee bit glisk o' a heaven on earth.'

I pondered over these words for a moment. 'Betty,' I said, 'that 's a beautiful way of putting it.'

'Ay, it may be beautiful—it may be, I say, Maister Weelum. I 'm no' a judge o' that; but it 's true—*an' I feel it 's true;* an' the best wish I can wish ye is that some day my experience in this will be yours.' And she wiped her cheek with her apron, and smoothed imaginary

creases out of the tablecover with the back of her hand.

'And—and, Betty, you must love Nathan very much?'

'Yes,' she said promptly, 'I love Nathan; but no' so much as I have reason to, an' no' mair than he deserves.'

'And was Nathan the only sweetheart you ever had, Betty?' I suddenly asked.

She rose from her chair and turned her face to the window. 'Dear me, Maister Weelum, that's a queer question to ask! What put that into your heid?'

'Oh, I don't know, Betty. I've often wondered.'

'Ye've often wondered that, have ye? Imphm!' And she sat down again. 'Weel, as the wean I nursed an' the man I'm prood o', ye 'll no' be denied an answer. No, Nathan's no' the only sweethe'rt I ever had. I loved anither man before I loved Nathan. I was aboot nineteen year auld at the time, an' if onybody had telt me then that Robert Frizzel wad never be mine I wad ha'e gane demented. Nineteen's a careless, haveral kind o' an age; but the he'rt can be awfu' glad an' joyous then, an' I must confess I had spurts o' happiness which carried me aff my feet in a wey I couldna understand later. The sun was aye shinin'; the

birds were aye whusslin'. I gaed to my bed singin', an' I wakened singin'. Oh, I mind it a' weel. The mistress—your mother—somewey was against it; but I thocht I kenned best, an' mony a sweet bit stolen oor I had up at that same gate at the heid o' the gairden there. He was a nice-lookin' man, was Robert, a bonny singer, an' a great toss amang the lassies, an' to be singled oot frae amang them a' was in my estimation something to be prood o'. Weel, I heard something aboot him no' to his credit—something mean an' dishonourable. Nathan was comin' aboot the gairden even then; an', though he had never said ocht to me, I could see, an'—an' I jaloused, an' it struck me that he wadna ha'e dune the same. Weel, the first chance I got I asked Robert aboot it, an' he juist laughed an' made licht o't. I telt him I never wanted to speak to him again, an'—an' I gaed to my bed that nicht an' grat the sairest greet I ever had in my life. Ay, I juist put him oot o' my he'rt an' steekit the door. An' then Nathan somewey opened it again, an'—— Michty me, Maister Weelum, your broth 's stane-cauld!' And, without another word, she lifted the soup-tureen and went ben to the kitchen.

I never for a moment suspected Betty of having had a calf-love affair, and her character-

istic recital of the episode was as unexpected as it was interesting. I asked the question which led up to it almost without premeditation, and not so much out of curiosity as from a desire to wean her pessimistic mind away from Nathan's indisposition. Poor body, she was always prone to meet her troubles halfway, and I feel so sure that her fears regarding Nathan are groundless that I do not reproach myself for interrupting her brooding thoughts.

After dinner I went through to Nathan's bedroom and had a short chat with him. He was assiduously reading *The Christian Herald* when I looked past the curtain of his bed, but on recognising me he at once stopped and took off his spectacles. 'Oh, it 's you, Maister Weelum,' he said, as he laid aside his paper. 'I—I thocht it micht be Betty.'

At the back of the bed, and only partly hidden, was a copy of *The Gardening World.* I looked first at one paper, then at the other, and remembering his predilection for secular literature, I smiled. Nathan smiled also. I made no remark; neither did Nathan; but somehow I am surer now than ever that Betty is wrong in thinking that he considers his condition serious.

With Nathan in normal health and at his

own fireside it is a difficult matter to keep the crack going; but with Nathan indisposed and abed it is well-nigh impossible. True, he answers any questions I put to him, but he never introduces a subject of conversation, and at his bedside, talking to him, I have always the strange feeling that he wants to put his head underneath the bedclothes.

When I had exhausted my news, and was wondering what next to say, Joe came in, and he had still the serious expression in his eyes I had noticed on meeting him on my way to the bank.

Joe is of great assistance to Betty at present, and his knowledge of housework, combined with his readiness to help, places him on a pedestal and makes him indispensable. I took the opportunity of thanking him for what he had done, and commended him strongly for his kindly services; and when I was going out, as an inducement to further exertions, I quietly slipped something into his hand that brought him to the salute with a most pronounced jerk.

Nathan was eyeing the stiff-as-starch Joe in surprise, as I gave him a good-afternoon nod. 'What's wrang wi' ye, Benjy?' I heard him say. 'Maister Weelum's no' an offisher; he's a gentleman.'

'That's exactly why I saluted him, Nathan,' said Joe very patly; and I was laughing quietly to myself as I re-entered my room.

Betty was what she calls 'bankin'' my fire; and, on looking round and catching the smile on my face, she wiped her fingers on her dust-cloth and smiled too.

'Nathan's a wee bit cheerier noo than he was in the foreday,' she said; and, after a pause, as a second thought, she added, 'at least he's as cheery as a Hebron could be in the circumstances.'

'Oh yes, Betty,' I said, 'he seems to be in a happy enough mood; but I think I have heard you say the Hebrons are not what one would call a hilarious family.'

'No, 'aith no, except Joe, an' him only sometimes—when he shouldna be. Imphm! Ye never met ony o' Nathan's sisters, Maister Weelum, did ye?'

'No, Betty. I didn't know he had any sisters.'

'Oh, weel, in a wey neither he has, for yin o' them lives in Auchensell an' the ither twae away in the back o' beyond, somewhere in Glencairn. They come to Thornhill only aince a year, at the Martinmas fair, an' of coorse Nathan stays at hame frae his wark, an' we've them doon here for their denner. Peasoup's a

weakness o' the Hebrons, an' they're awfu' keen on pork ribs, so I mak' my bill o' fare to suit them. An' then, the time I'm cleanin' up, they a' sit roon the fire, an' Nathan smokes an' spits, an' his sisters sit strecht up in their chairs, lookin' frae the fire to the window, an' whisperin' to each ither. Ye see, Nathan brocht them up. They look on him in a wey as their faither, an' they defer to him even yet, an' aye wait on him speakin' first, so ye can understaun their tongues dinna gang juist like hand-bells; no, 'aith no, they do not. Nathan's fair, but they are dark an' swarthy, an' they a' wear black dolmans, 'lastic-sided boots, an' white stockin's, an' they aye come wi' umbrellas in their haun even though the weather's as dry as tinder. Thomasina frae Auchensell is the auldest, an' she's the only yin that has a family; an' when Nathan does say ocht it's aye her he speaks to, an' the ither twae juist sit an' mutter to yin anither, lookin' quite pleased an' satisfied. I'm used wi' them noo; but the first time I had them here I was at my wits' end. No' a word could I get oot o' them, an' Nathan—weel, I didna ken him very weel then either—*he* could hardly be seen for pipe-reek, an' it was only because I couldna do the deaf an' dumb alphabet that I didna try it on them. An' mair than that, Maister

Weelum, here's anither very queer thing. Do you know that their men—their marrit men, I mean—have never been inside this door. I've never met them, no' even seen them; an' Nathan—weel, I dare say he wad be at their waddin's, but I question if he wad stop an' speak to them if he met them on the king's highway. Oh, I tell ye, they're queer! Ye micht marry a Hebron, but ye never get into the family.'

'And what about Joe?' I asked. 'Does he join these annual reunions?'

'Catch Joe sittin' in the hoose on a Thornhill fair-day. No, no, Joe's ower keen on the pea-guns, an' the Aunt Sally booth, an' siclike to ha'e ony time to help Nathan to entertain his sisters. He's a queer, queer mixture is Joe; but his he'rt's in the richt place for a' that. Ha'e ye seen him the day?'

'Yes; I met him on the street, looking rather melancholy, I thought. You—you haven't put him under the pledge again, Betty?'

'Ye thocht he looked melancholy, did ye? Weel, he's under nae pledge to me. It's no' that that's putten him aboot. Puir Joe! puir Joe!'

'What is it, then, Betty?'

She hesitated for a minute, and I at once

apologised, thinking I was unconsciously prying into family affairs.

'Oh, it 's no' that I 'm hankerin' for, Maister Weelum. The fact is, it 's in a wey concerned wi' a friend o' yours, an' I don't know very weel hoo to begin; but ye mind me tellin' ye aboot Joe gettin' the awfu' fricht meetin' a lady he thocht was deid an' buried? You an' me made licht o't; but Joe wadna be convinced, an' last nicht he saw the lady again, an'—noo, Maister Weelum, this is the queer bit o' the story—the lady was Miss Stuart.'

'How did he know that, Betty?'

'Weel, he was in the kitchen last nicht when I brocht her through frae Mrs Jardine's to see your picter, an' he was so putten aboot that he gaed strecht away hame to the Cuddy Lane withoot sayin' a word to onybody. This mornin' he spoke to me aboot it, an' asked her name, an' when I said it was Miss Stuart he nearly fainted. "Same name," he said, "and the same locket," an' that 's a' I could get oot o' him; an' he was so dazed an' bamboozled that he couldna mind my messages, an' I had to write them doon on a bit paper. Noo, Maister Weelum, what mak' ye o' that?'

'Same name and the same locket!' I repeated slowly. 'Whatever could he mean by that?'

'I dinna ken. I asked him, but his lips

shut wi' a snap like a handbag. If I hadna asked he wad ha'e telt me; the Hebron cam' oot there again, Maister Weelum.'

'Oh, Betty, it must be a foolish fancy. The chance of Joe having met Miss Stuart before has, of course, to be considered; but the lady he knew died twenty-four years ago. Miss Stuart must have been a baby then.'

'Mebbe it was her mother, Maister Weelum.'

In a flash the possibility occurred to me. I looked quickly and keenly at Betty, but her eye challenged my gaze clearly and without flinching.

'Ye're thinkin' I'm speakin' in riddles, an' keepin' something back; if ye do, ye're wrang, Maister Weelum. It was the locket that made me think o' her mother; it wad be a very likely keepsake for her to ha'e.'

'Betty, my dear, I don't doubt you. I am sure you are telling me all you know; you have no motive for keeping anything back. I—I am very much interested in Miss Stuart, more so than in any woman I know. There is some uncertainty connected with her affairs which, unless it is cleared up, will be to her disadvantage. I may be thinking too quickly, and the wish may be father to the thought; but it strikes me that a chat with Joe would clear the air. He is in Nathan's bedroom.

Do you think he would come in and have a talk with me alone?'

'Oh, I'm sure he'll do that wi' pleesure. But, Maister Weelum, if it's ocht ye want to ken, ye maunna ask him questions. I ken Joe; he's a Hebron, an'—weel, ye understaun?'

I quite understood; and when, later, Joe came into my room I was busy examining a pair of old holster pistols which had belonged to my grandfather. 'Oh, it's you, Joe!' I said. 'You're the very man I want. I know you understand more about these things than I do, and I should be obliged to you if you would kindly help me to clean them up a bit.'

'Certainly, sir,' he said with alacrity. 'I'll soon polish them up. But it's a dirty job; don't you bother with them. I'll see to them in the back-kitchen.'

In conversation with Betty or Nathan, Joe employs the Doric as they do; but, thanks to his service in the south and abroad, he is equally familiar with English as it is read, and in speaking to me he doesn't even betray the semblance of the Scots accent.

I hadn't bargained for his taking the pistols off to the back-kitchen, however. This wouldn't suit my plan. Joint operations were necessary for a crack such as I wanted. Accordingly I

suggested we should cover the better-lit end of the table with a newspaper, and exercise care; and so it came to pass that in a few minutes Joe and I were up to the wrists in emery and oil, and our tongues going like Betty's hand-bells.

CHAPTER XVI.

AT length, by finesse and a good deal of circumlocution, I got the conversation worked round from accidental shooting to accidental meetings, related one or two coincidences which made him pause in his work, and then casually mentioned that Betty had told me of his meeting Miss Stuart, and the shock he had received.

'Yes, Mr Russell,' he said, 'I don't know what to say about that. I couldn't get to sleep last night for thinking of it.'

'Well, Joe, it seems plain enough to me. The lady you knew died twenty-four years ago. Miss Stuart is not more than twenty-five, so it couldn't possibly be she whom you knew.'

'That is so, sir; I admit that,' and he stopped polishing; 'and it's a far cry from Thornhill to Toledo; but the Miss Stuart I saw last night was wearing a locket which I am sure belonged to a Mrs Stuart who died in Toledo twenty-four years ago. If I'm wrong, then, sir, my name is not Joseph Hebron.'

I was positively tingling with excitement,

and strangely conscious I was on the eve of a great discovery. A thousand thoughts flashed through my mind; I felt quite overcome and bewildered. Here, 'far from the madding crowd,' in this sleepy little village with its easy-going, unpretentious ways, I had met the woman God made for me; and there, polishing the barrel of my grandsire's old pistol, stood one of the least important of its villagers, who of a surety held the key to all the mysteries that had baffled our unveiling. It seemed unreal, incredible, impossible, yet it was absolutely true, for clutched to my heart I held the sacred memory of our moonlight talk, I felt the touch of her hand, and her parting words were ever ringing in my ears; and Joe's earnestness and assurance were as a presage to me that the mists would soon be rolled away. Betty's words came to me, 'If it's ocht ye want to ken, ye maunna ask him questions;' but I felt I must put her advice aside. Questions must be asked, and answers must be given willingly, not dragged out; and if I was to obtain these answers Joe must be to some extent taken into my confidence.

'Joe,' I said, 'you speak with a positiveness which carries conviction with it, and encourages me to great expectations. Now I'll be honest and candid with you, and you must be frank

with me and answer fully and truly one or two questions I wish to put to you. You admit that the remarkable likeness you see in Miss Stuart to a Mrs Stuart you knew long ago has disturbed your mind, and you are quite convinced that the locket Miss Stuart wears belonged to that lady. There is a probable connection here which, if it can be established, will mean much to Miss Stuart. Her affairs are in my hands, and naturally I am very much interested in this. Now, Joe, you don't know me. Betty does. Will you take her word as surety for my honourableness, and tell me frankly all I may ask?'

Joe looked very intently at me while I was speaking. Then he laid down the pistol and emery-cloth with a suddenness and determination which plainly told me that his yea would be yea, and his nay, nay. 'Mr Russell,' he said earnestly, 'I have always sworn by Nathan's Betty; she swears by you in everything. If any information I can give will be of service to Miss Stuart you're welcome to it, and I'll answer truthfully whatever you ask.'

'Thank you, Joe. I know you will. Well, first of all, who was Mrs Stuart?'

'She was the wife of Major Stuart of my old regiment, the 25th.'

'Do you remember his full name?'

'Yes, sir. It was Major Sommerville Stuart of Abereran, Perthshire.'

'Where did they live together as husband and wife?'

'Well, sir, it was like this. You see—eh—well, perhaps I had better tell you what I know in my own way—some pointed questions are not easily answered.'

I nodded. 'All right, Joe; just as you wish,' I replied.

'Well, we were stationed at Gibraltar when the Major was married. I was his orderly at the time, and he took me with him to a town called Toledo, where the marriage took place. I saw the lady—a French lady she was—only once before she was Mrs Stuart; she and the Major were on horseback, and a fine-looking pair they were; and I saw her twice after they came back to Toledo from their honeymoon. She was then wearing the locket I saw last night. It was one of the marriage presents he gave her, and I remember seeing it on his dressing-room table in the hotel, and thinking he was lucky to be able to buy such a nice gift. I was courting at that time—not Sally; another girl who died—and I—well, I would have given a whole year's pay to be able to buy my girl one like it. That's how I remember it so well. The Major stayed in Toledo for about a week

after his honeymoon trip, and then he went to headquarters, taking me with him of course; but Mrs Stuart remained at Toledo. She never came down to Gib. that I know of, but the Major went back once or twice. Then about a year after their marriage she died. The Major got the sad news at mess, and left that night, and I followed next day with his luggage. We returned the day after the funeral, and—and that's all I know, I think.' Then he picked up his emery-cloth and resumed his polishing, as if the story he had told was of ordinary import.

'Joe,' I said after a pause, 'what you have told me is most valuable information, and I thank you very much indeed. Were you present at the marriage ceremony?'

'Yes, sir, as a spectator, of course. I had nothing particular to do, and was in a strange town, and I was anxious to see what a foreign marriage was like.'

'Naturally! Then the marriage was in a church in Toledo?'

'Yes, sir; but I don't remember the name of the church.'

'Ah, Joe, that's a pity, now. Could you describe it to me? I know Toledo, and might be able to refresh your memory.'

'Well, sir, it was a very old-looking place, built of brick, and one part was newer-looking

than the other. There's a big bridge at the entrance to the town'——

'Yes, Joe, the Bridge of Alcantara.'

'That's the name, sir. Well, I think I could go from the bridge right up to the church even yet. If I had a piece of paper and a pencil I could show you.'

I readily supplied him with pencil and paper, and after a little cogitation and a good deal of muttering, 'Forward, right turn, left wheel, steady now, forward,' he handed me the diagram of what he judged was the route. As it wasn't drawn to a scale, and no streets were noted, it was quite unintelligible to me; but it proved Joe had it in his mind's eye, and so far this was quite satisfactory. 'Thank you, Joe,' I said. 'May I keep this?'

He nodded, and I put it in my pocket. 'Now, just two questions more. Was Mrs Stuart buried in Toledo?'

'No, sir. She lies in a cemetery a few miles out of Toledo.'

'You don't remember the name of the place?'

'Well, sir, I do—sometimes. It reminded me, when I heard it first, of the old home-name of Dalgonnar, but it wasn't that—very near it, though.'

'Dalgonnar—Dal—— Ah, Joe, was it not Algodor?'

'That's the name, sir—Algodor. I see you've been there. Well, sir, Mrs Stuart's buried at Algodor.'

Unknown to Joe, I had taken shorthand notes of the gist of his information, and when he was again busy with his emery I went over them carefully. 'By the way, Joe,' I asked, 'did you ever hear anything about the birth of a child?'

'Yes, sir. Mrs Stuart died in childbed, but the child lived. I don't remember hearing whether it was a boy or a girl. Mr Trent, our chaplain, could tell you about that. He went up with the Major and baptised it.'

'And where and how can Mr Trent be found now?'

'Well, sir—strange—last time I came up from Brighton I had an hour to wait at Carlisle, and I met him in the street when I was taking a stroll between trains. He's not changed much, and I knew him at once and saluted. He stopped me, and asked me my name and regiment, said he was in a hurry, but that he lived at Stanwix, and if at any time I was in the locality to be sure and call on him.'

'Joe,' I said, 'you're a brick, a most invaluable friend to me just now, and I cannot tell you how much all this means to Miss Stuart

and to me. There is much yet of which we shall require proof; but it is a fact, Joe, that Major Sommerville Stuart of Abereran, your Major, was her father. It may be necessary, in fact it will be imperative, that we should send some one out to Toledo. I know it is asking a good deal, but would you accompany any one we may depute to go? Your presence is very essential, and your good service will be amply remunerated.'

'Well, Mr Russell, I'm not of much use here, and I'll not be wanted elsewhere till July. If I can be any good to you, I—I don't mind going. In a way, I'll be in the Major's service again.'

I never drink whisky during the day; but somehow I felt that a compact such as Joe and I had made was sufficient excuse for breaking any rule. We drank success to our undertaking, and when Joe had left me I sat down, and, after thinking things over, I came to the conclusion that Providence, in a most wonderful way, was making the crooked path straight; and that, with the exception of Nathan, Joe had the most extraordinary by-nature of any man I ever knew.

. . . . . .

I stayed Betty's hand when she came in to light up for the night. I knew she was just

dying to know how I had got on with Joe; and, as his story would be meaningless without the prologue, I told her everything. The flickering firelight fell on her dear old face, and the glint in her eye quickened as I unfolded my love-story. And when I had finished she came over, and, bending down, kissed me.

'The Lord's your shepherd. He's leadin' ye by the still waters,' she whispered. 'An', oh, Maister Weelum, Joseph Hebron's a prood, prood man this nicht.'

CHAPTER XVII.

OF late it has truly been a time of startling events with me. One surprise has followed hard on the heels of another, and possibilities new to my horizon are looming before me, bidding fair to alter—and may I trust perfect?—my whole line of life. And yet I am not unduly excited or exercised in mind. I wonder is this because my drama is being acted on staging of God's own making, and amidst scenery painted by His own hand? I know how strongly we are all influenced by environment. A thunderstorm over the busy city, raging around crowded haunts and lighting up with its pointed fire all of man's handiwork, is to me appalling and menacing; in the country, among the echoing hills and sombre woods, it is grand and inspiring. When I think of it, it is not unlikely that a closer acquaintance with Nature and an insight into the marvellous laws which govern her have brought to me a keener sense of the true proportion of things. The pulsing sap in a February sprig of hawthorn is wonderful and mysterious, more wonderful far than Joe's acquaint-

ance with Toledo or my meeting Désirée Stuart in Nithbank Wood.

. . . . . .

Accompanied by Bang and Jip, I walked out to the station yesterday to meet Murray Monteith, and when I saw him step from the train to the platform I felt what Betty calls a 'ruggin'' at my heart, for very emphatically he appeared as a link binding me to a life which I know I must soon re-enter, and which I have lately ignored and well-nigh forgotten.

Monteith is one of the aristocrats of our profession, a gentleman by breeding and nature from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot. Quiet, reserved, well knit and well groomed, he fills the eye and takes the heart wherever he goes, and as I shook hands with him I felt a secret pride in the knowledge that he is my partner.

I welcomed him warmly to the strath of his forefathers, and assured him that if his knife and fork happened to be reversed at dinner, or if any one offered a left-hand shake, he must just count it an accident, as we had long ago ceased to remember the disreputable part his namesake played in pre-Bannockburn days.

We had a twelve o'clock dinner: broth—not the kind everybody or anybody makes, but Betty's broth—boiled beef, with potatoes in

their skins, followed by a jam-roll, of which Monteith had two liberal helpings. I told him that long ago it was usual to finish up a dinner with another plateful of broth, and he assured me that had he not partaken of the jam-roll he would gladly have revived the custom. I didn't forget to tell Betty of the appreciation, and I know it pleased her, for when we drew in our chairs for a smoke I heard her voice from the back-kitchen raised, as timmer as of old, in the lilting strains of 'The Farmer's Boy.'

Then through tobacco-reek we talked business—at least Monteith did, and I listened. He had much to tell me, and he talks well. After disposing of some private matters, we broached the all-important object of our visit to Mrs Stuart, and it was only when we came to the unpleasant part of Miss Stuart's affairs that I told him of my wonderful discovery and the astonishing part that Joe had played in it.

Dressed in his Sunday best, Joe was awaiting his call in the kitchen, and on being brought in he was closely questioned by Monteith. Not only did Joe confirm all he had told me before, but he added to our knowledge by giving us the exact date of the baptism of the Major's baby. It synchronised with the date of a black day in Joe's life, when a girl died of whom he was very fond. When I was thinking sentimentally of

his tragedy, and making allowances for much remissness that Betty deplores, Monteith, with arched eyebrow, was staring at him through a monocle, thanking Providence for having so opportunely sent him our way, and counting him a means to a successful end.

Long after Joe had left the room, Murray Monteith sat lost in thought. Monteith cannot leave a fire alone when he is thinking anything out. His room in our premises in Charlotte Square adjoins mine, and if I hear through the wall a vigorous poking and smashing going on I know he is tackling a ticklish problem. Yesterday, in five minutes, he 'bashed' Betty's fire out of recognition; and when for the tenth time he had lifted and dropped the poker he turned to me suddenly and said, 'By Jove, Russell, this will be a bitter pill for our friends Smart & Scobie!' I told him I didn't care a rap for that; what gratified me beyond measure was the fact that a sweet, sensitive girl had been spared humiliation, and that, instead of being a nameless lassie, she was Miss Stuart of Abereran.

I spoke very feelingly, and Monteith wasn't slow to notice it. He focussed me slowly through his monocle. 'I share that sentiment with you, Russell,' he said. 'I am not unmindful of her, though I give voice to my

feeling of exultation in scoring a point. I trust Miss Stuart has no inkling of what has been standing in our way to prevent a settlement in her affairs. You—you haven't met her yet?'

'Oh yes; we are a small community here, and I have spoken to her once or twice.'

'Then you've been visiting at Nithbank House?'

'Not since I went under my mother's care twenty years ago, when the Ewarts lived there.'

'Oh!' and again he fixed me through his monocle. But he saw I was disinclined to go into details, and his good breeding made further questioning impossible. 'Well,' he said, after a pause, 'Mrs Stuart will be delighted to know all this. Her stepson, Maurice Stuart, has been at the root of all this trouble. I understand he wanted to marry Miss Stuart; but she would have nothing to do with him, and in retaliation he has done his level best to turn the mystery of his uncle's marriage to his own account. He it was who instructed Smart and Scobie. He's an awful waster, I believe, and his stepmother long ago cut him adrift.'

This was news to me, but I feigned indifference, and as adroitly as I possibly could turned the subject of our conversation to Joe and the part he had yet to play. 'I think, Monteith,'

I said, 'we ought to take him with us to-day to Nithbank House. Mrs Stuart will be interested in him, and wishful, no doubt, to see and talk with him.'

'Oh, certainly,' said Monteith, as he snipped the end off another cigar; 'and, if he's still about, you had better call him at once. The carriage is at the door, I see.'

Mrs Stuart had very kindly sent her brougham for us; and so it came to pass that when we left the door Joe was sitting on the dicky beside the coachman, arms folded and eyes front—conscious, however, I felt sure, that Nathan's Betty was approvingly watching him from behind the dining-room curtains.

We were received very graciously by Mrs Stuart in the library. I introduced Monteith to her, and she at once apologised for having put him to the trouble and inconvenience of travelling so far. Then she inquired in a very kindly way after my health, and told me that when first her niece had informed her of my residence in the village she felt annoyed that the firm had not advised her; but that, after all, it was perhaps wisely kept from her, as she would only have worried me about business and made herself a nuisance.

I laughingly said something in reply about doctors being autocrats, and thanked her for

her inquiries and consideration, and, to my great relief, the subject was gradually and agreeably changed to something else.

The Hon. Mrs Stuart is tall and angular, and she dresses in stern black, as becometh a sorrowing widow. She has, for a woman, a very square, assertive chin and a somewhat determined mouth; but the effect of the hard, firm chiselling of the lower part of the face is discounted by the kindly expression of her mellow, blue-gray eyes. Her hair is streaked with gray, and she has arrived at that time of life when, for preference, she sits and talks to visitors with her back to the light.

As Monteith had surmised, the important business she had referred to in her letter had to do with Miss Stuart's affairs, and as this was causing her great anxiety we went into the matter at once.

She explained to us, as she had done privately to me before, that she really didn't know, or, rather, that she had never had opportunities of knowing, her late brother-in-law, General Stuart. 'He was queer,' she said, 'very queer; lived in a bleak part of Cornwall most of his time, preferring it to Abereran in Perthshire; for years kept his marriage a secret, and made no mention of a daughter; and then, when we were looking forward with reasonable certainty

to some day seeing Maurice laird of Abereran, a handsome girl of eighteen, an undoubted Stuart, was brought home from a Continental school, and, as his daughter, Désirée Stuart, installed mistress of his house. Personally, I had not a doubt of Miss Stuart's status or right of birth; but Maurice—well'—— and she shrugged her shoulders and looked thoughtfully away down the avenue.

I asked my partner to tell her what we had learned from Joe, and he did so in that easy, off-hand, taken-for-granted style which we men of law sometimes affect, and which is intended to impress our clients with our astuteness and perspicacity. At first Mrs Stuart looked indifferent; but as the story was unfolded, and Joe's part established, she sat forward in her chair in utter amazement. 'Remarkable! remarkable!' she exclaimed. 'I never heard of such a wonderful coincidence.'

After we had discussed it in all its bearings, and settled on a definite plan of action, Joe was brought in. As my presence and advice were no longer necessary, I asked that I might be permitted to see Miss Stuart with reference to her Banku shares, and to this Mrs Stuart readily agreed. When we were passing through the hall to the drawing-room she asked if it was my intention to acquaint her niece with the news

we had learned. I replied that as Miss Stuart had not been made aware of the nature of the difficulty which had so long confronted us, it wouldn't be advisable to tell her all we knew; but, with her permission, I would take the opportunity of informing her that certain knowledge we had acquired lately was likely to hasten a settlement. She agreed with me in this, and it was with a beating heart I entered the drawing-room.

CHAPTER XVIII.

MISS STUART was sitting before an easel in the large oriel, and as her aunt briefly announced me and withdrew in her eagerness to talk to the wonderful Joe, she rose and greeted me warmly. 'Oh, Mr Russell,' she said, 'I *am* glad to see you. Somehow I can't paint to-day; the inspiration is wanting;' and she put her brushes in the jar and laid aside her palette.

It was a large room lit by two windows, one facing the south, the other to the west overlooking the wooded banks of the winding Nith. The flush of the sunset was tingeing the sky and flooding the room with a subdued light which mellowed and softened the deep black of the Indian furniture against the pale-gray walls and the deeper-gray carpet. A large fire, crowned with a halo of short blue flame, glowed in the grate, and a 'megilpy' odour, mingling with the faint, indescribable perfume which ladies carry with them, lingered around, and reminded me of a reception afternoon in a Queen Street studio of long ago.

I was conscious of these details in my

surroundings, although my eyes had never wandered for a moment from the sweet face of my dream-lady, and followed her greedily as she walked forward to the firelight.

I explained to her that my partner, Mr Monteith, was engaged with Mrs Stuart on business, and that I had taken the opportunity of having a word with her on a similar subject.

She smiled, wearily I thought, and seated herself. 'I don't like business talks, Mr Russell,' she said. 'Neither did father. It must be a family trait. Still, I dare say they are incumbent on us sometimes. I trust it is pleasant business you wish to talk over.'

'Oh yes, it is pleasant enough,' I said, and her face brightened. 'Sitting here,' I continued, after a pause, 'and seeing you in such a perfect setting, I am strongly tempted to talk to you on a subject nearer my heart; but—well, I have already promised you to put my feelings into the background for the time being, and, hard though it may be, I will be true to my word. You remember I talked to you about your interest in the Banku Oil Company? Well, the last dividend was paid to us, one hundred pounds of which has been lodged in the local bank, and I have here a cheque-book which you can use from time to time as you may require.'

'You are very thoughtful for me, Mr Russell,' she said softly, 'and I thank you very, very much. One hundred pounds is surely a lot of money. I could do with less, you know, if'——

'Not at all, Miss Stuart. The money is yours; use it as you like, and just let me know when you need more. You—you don't mind asking me?'

'No,' she said promptly, and as she trustfully looked me in the eyes her mouth retained the form of that little word long after it had passed her lips. She was sitting in profile against the firelit background, leaning slightly forward in her chair, her elbow on her knee and her chin resting lightly on the tips of her fingers. Her pose was so easy and graceful, and her dear face, in its beauty of feature and earnestness of expression, so bewitching, that I could not conceal my longing and admiration. I would have given the world to be allowed to kneel down beside her, and there, in the mystic glamour of the firelight, worship silently and reverently at her shrine. My steady gaze disconcerted her, and I cursed my temerity when I saw a blush spreading over her half-averted face.

'Socrates has many disciples still, Mr Russell,' she said, without any sign of dis-

pleasure in her tone; and her eyes again sought mine.

'Yes. How so, Miss Stuart?'

'He sought the truth in doing good; so do you. Since father's death, and until—well, very lately, I haven't known what it is to have a joyous mind. I seem to have been walking among shadows, and a dread has always been knocking at my heart. You, by your kindly attention and your sympathy, have lightened my burden and brought a ray of hope to me; and, do you know, Mrs Jardine's little children every evening of their sweet young lives ask God to bless you for being kind to their dear daddy.'

Our line of business conversation had got a twist somehow, and I didn't very well know what to say in reply, or how best, without breaking away at a tangent, I could get back to the subject I had in my mind. 'I am sorry to hear you have had your troubles, Miss Stuart,' I said after reflection; 'but I am glad to know that even to a small degree I have made your burdens lighter. I have promised to be your friend; you 'll not find me wanting, I assure you. Doubtless your affairs have worried you, but daylight is showing through now, and in a few weeks I trust everything will be settled to your satisfaction. Do you

know, we have with us to-day some one who knew your father, and who was present at his marriage ceremony.'

'Some one who knew my father, and who was present at his marriage ceremony!' she repeated slowly, as if she couldn't at once realise what it meant.

'Yes!' and, as I noted the colour gradually leaving her cheek, it came to me in a flash that I had erred in mentioning the fact in conjunction with a satisfactory settlement of her affairs. Even to an obtuse mind the inference was obvious, and I felt I had blundered grievously. Her agitation was unmistakable, and to relieve the situation I was about to make a remark, when she interrupted me.

'One moment, please;' and she turned her face away from me. 'This man, you say, was present when my father and mother were married, and you mention it as if it had a special significance. Does this affect me—I mean, would it make any difference to my name or prospects—my name particularly?'

'Oh yes, it would, Miss Stuart,' I said feelingly.

'Can you rely on what this man says?'

'Most emphatically, and we shall at once take steps to prove it.'

'When did you hear about this?'

'Quite lately.'

'Was it before you spoke to me, and—and promised to be my friend?'

'I didn't know about it then. It was only the day before yesterday it came to my knowledge.'

There was silence between us for a time, and the ormolu clock on the marble mantelpiece ticked loudly.

Then she rose to her feet and looked toward me, smiling through tear-dimmed eyes. 'You have made me very happy, Mr Russell. I don't want to know anything further. I leave myself confidently in your hands. You 'll find cigarettes on the table behind you; you may smoke here;' and she crossed the room and sat down at the piano. She struck a few chords, deep as her own feelings; then she rose and came toward me. 'Mr Russell, do you know I have never known the joy of a mother's caress or the blessing of a mother's good-night kiss. Such memories of childhood are not mine, and my past is empty—empty. My father, for reasons of which I know nothing, never mentioned my mother's name to me. I was brought up among strangers, kindly enough, but still strangers. I never came in contact with other children. In a way, I was isolated from everything heartfelt and human;

it is only since I got to know your neighbours that I have had a glimpse of what is surely the truest, sweetest, and happiest side of life. I like your nurse, your Betty. She once put her hand on my arm, and it had such a motherly touch that I wanted to kiss her. Perhaps you are thinking that this has no connection with anything that has passed between us. Well, you may be right in thinking so; but it is on my mind and in my heart, and I just wanted to tell you now, as I feel my future is hanging by a thread—a very slender thread—and I may not have another opportunity of saying it.'

I understood her mood, and made no reply; but I took her hand, raised it to my lips, and kissed it.

We were standing together in the oriel, watching the sunset splendour through the leafless trees, when Mrs Stuart and Murray Monteith joined us. Once or twice I caught my partner admiringly following Miss Stuart's movements, and he looked several times at me with a mark of interrogation in his eye. I had a feeling that he 'jaloused,' as Betty would put it, and it set me a-thinking; only for a moment, however, and I soon dismissed him and his monocle from my mind.

We had afternoon tea and a pleasant chat on current topics, and then our carriage was

called. Just before we started, when we were standing in the hall, Miss Stuart asked me, in an undertone, if she could see, just for a minute, the man who had known her father. I called Joe inside, and Miss Stuart took him into the drawing-room. When he joined us again there was a glad look in his eye, and I knew his heart was proud within him, for he had shaken hands with his old Major's daughter.

I sat quiet and preoccupied in the corner of the brougham when driving home.

Just as the first twinkling light shone out ahead from the Gillfoot turn, Monteith turned to me. 'Russell,' he said, 'pardon my interrupting the flow of your pleasant meditations. You're a queer fellow in many ways; you—you don't say much till it suits you; but I can see as far through a brick wall as any one, and it may be—I say it *may* be—agreeable to you to know that Blackford Hall in Morningside will shortly be in the market. I've heard you say that if you ever settled down to married life you would like to live there.'

'Thank you, Monteith, for your information,' I said. 'It *is* agreeable to me to know this.'

Nothing further was said on the subject till we were seated at my cosy fireside. Then Murray Monteith, blowing clouds of fragrant smoke above him, and glancing round my clean,

well-furnished walls, said, 'By Jove, Russell! you're a lucky fellow; an old doting nurse there,' inclining his head toward the kitchen, 'who loves you almost with a mother's affection, and who wouldn't allow the wind to blow on you if she could prevent it, and the love of a girl like—like'—— and he hesitated and looked at me.

'Go on, Monteith; you're doing all right.'

'Go on! Hang it, man, *you* go on! Can't you speak, you—you dungeon, and give me a tag on which to hang my congratulations?'

'You don't require a tag, Monteith. A gag would be more suitable in the circumstances.'

'Now, look here, Russell,' he said, as he flung his cigar-stump into the fire and fixed me through his monocle, 'you're not honest with me when you say that, and you know you are not. You and I are not strangers to each other, and there's no occasion for secrecy. If you have no matrimonial news, I have. I thought, perhaps, if you had taken me into your confidence, it would have been a good opportunity for me to acquaint you, in a gradual, chatty way, with my plans. As you haven't—well, all I shall say now is that I am engaged.'

'My dear Monteith, I'm delighted to hear you say so, and I heartily congratulate you.

You're the very best fellow I know, and you're marrying a lady in every way worthy of you. Miss Playfair is a'——

'Miss Playfair!' he exclaimed, in astonishment. 'How do you know?'

'Oh, well, the last time I visited you, before leaving Edinburgh, I, like you, was confronted with a brick wall, and I saw a little way through it. But that's neither here nor there. What we have to do now is to signalise the event;' and for the second time within two days I tasted a liquid element at an unusual hour.

'And when does the great event come off, Monteith?' I asked.

'Well, Russell,' he said, 'that is a matter which in a way depends on you. You see, I shall need to wait till you are quite recovered and back to business again. A honeymoon would naturally follow the ceremony,' he laughingly said, 'and it wouldn't do for both the principals of Monteith & Russell to be away at the same time.'

. . . . . .

Dr Grierson and Mr Crichton joined us later at supper. Monteith is a keen devotee of the chessboard; and while he was trying conclusions with the banker, Dr Grierson and I went upstairs into my own little room. I told him all that had taken place—of my meetings

with Miss Stuart, and the turn in the tide of her affairs—and he congratulated me and gave me much encouragement. Then I asked him when he thought I should be sufficiently well to resume business.

'Well, William,' he said, 'you have to see Dr Balfour and get his permission before you can go back to town. Personally, I cannot give you even an approximate date. You are making splendid progress, and unless there are very urgent reasons for your return, I should advise you to keep free from worry on that score. Leave yourself in my hands, and before long, with Dr Balfour's concurrence, I shall be able to say when you may with safety receive marching orders.'

Murray Monteith had to leave me without being able to arrange a particular date for his marriage. I am very sorry; but, after all, his great day may dawn sooner than he expects.

CHAPTER XIX.

MARCH came in like a lion, and, true to its proverbial reputation, it is going out like a lamb. Nature is waking from her long winter sleep, and is beginning to clothe herself anew. The hawthorn hedgerows, which only three weeks ago were hidden in piled-up wreaths of drifted snow, are covered now with a blush of green, and already in their bielded clefts the sparrows and yellow-yoits are preparing to build for themselves 'an house wherein to dwell.' There is a kindly warmth in the sun's rays as they lie on the upturned brown fields, and a soft genial breath is stealing through the woods and lingering lovingly round the ash and the chestnut, those early risers in the first dawn of spring. What a boldness and assertiveness there is in the big black bud of the ash, and how promising is the bulging pink-brown bud of the chestnut! To those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, how wonderful is the story they tell! If I were a preacher of God's gospel, I question if I could confine the selection of my texts to the literal words from His holy book. Of late I have been

lying much in Nature's lap; I have listened with greedy, receptive ears to her song and story; I have felt the throbbing of her great mother heart, and learned in her workings many of the wonderful ways of her great Controller. And I am leaving her knee, creeping out of God's own sanctuary, humbled and chastened, yet gladdened and relieved withal, to think that into the city life, which I must soon re-enter, I am carrying with me that heaven-sent faculty of finding 'tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, sermons in stones, and good in everything.'

And these lanes and solitary bypaths which have been my schoolroom are becoming daily more interesting, more insistent in their appeal. They are now providing something fresh and pleasing every day. I must walk slowly and quietly, so that I may see and hear every titbit of their store. A country walk at the rate of four miles an hour is very invigorating, to those in good health very pleasurable; but such is not possible on my byway at this season of the year, except to the Philistines. Even Bang and Jip do not exceed the half-mile limit; and as for myself—well, Dr Grierson has oftener than once accompanied me down the Gillfoot road, and I know he doesn't gauge the progress of my recovery by my

rate of locomotion. No; if I must see and hear aright I have to walk slowly, and when the mavis is singing at close o' day I must halt altogether if I would listen as I ought.

For many mornings past a blackbird from the top of the apple-tree in our garden has been challenging Tom Jardine to a trial of song; and, much as I love to lie and listen to my neighbour's pure tenor voice in 'The Lea Rig' or 'Flow gently, sweet Afton,' I have not been sorry when, as if acknowledging defeat, he has stopped to hearken to his feathered rival in the old apple-tree.

Now that Tom has got over all his worries, and the sun is rising earlier, his heart is becoming attuned, and the familiar old Scots airs are accompanying the different items of his morning duties just as they used to do when first I came to stay with Betty. I hear the gray mare's whinny, the turning of the key in the stable door, the lid of the corn-bin creaking on its rusty hinges—these are all as they used to be. But, alas! all is quiet in Betty's kitchen now, and I miss the cheery sounds of the early breakfast preparations, for Nathan is lying prostrate in the back-room, and poor Betty's rest is too much disturbed to permit of her rising with the dawn.

Every Friday evening since I came here I have given Nathan an envelope enclosing my weekly contribution toward the household expenses—that is, of course, in accordance with the arrangement I made with Betty; and at first I often used to wonder if she had fully explained the matter to him, because he always took the packet from me in a hesitating, doubtful way, very much as a debtor would accept a summons. Later he just smiled, and without a word put it in his trousers-pocket, looking sideways at me and inclining his head toward Betty wherever she happened to be at the time.

Last Friday night, when I was at his bedside, I handed him the envelope as usual. He didn't hold out his hand for it; so I laid it down on the coverlet, and nothing was said for a time. Then, nodding toward a wooden box in the corner of the room, he said, 'Maister Weelum, will ye open the lid o' that kist, if ye please, an' bring me the wee tin box that's lyin' at the left-haun side?'

I did as he requested. It was an old, battered, black japanned receptacle without a lock, and only secured against accidental opening by a wooden peg inserted through the catch. Withdrawing the peg and placing it between his teeth, he took off the lid, and

there—some clean, others crumpled and dirty —was every envelope I had given him, and all of them unopened, as I had put them into his hand.

'Maister Weelum,' he said, after a pause, 'I mak' nae great shape at speakin' or explainin'; but I've been thinkin', as ye've been idle an' aff yer wark sae lang, ye'll mebbe no' ha'e muckle comin' in the noo, an'—an'—— Auch! I was gaun to say something mair, an' I've forgot it; but ye can tak' it a' back if it's ony use to ye.'

'Nathan,' I said, in astonishment, 'I—I don't quite understand. Why should you offer me these?'

He gave a wee bit quiet laugh. 'I dinna ken what kind o' a job ye ha'e, Maister Weelum. Betty never telt me, an' I never asked; but wi' us yins doon here it's nae wark, nae pey. Ye've been idle a lang time, as I've said, an' I thocht mebbe it micht come in handy. Of coorse, if ye dinna need it—weel, there's nae hairm dune.'

I didn't know very well what to say, but I thanked him, and assured him that I didn't require money, explaining that it came to me whether I was working or not. This last bit of information roused Nathan's interest.

'Comes in to ye whether ye're workin' or

no'! Imphm! Ye maun be connec'it wi' meenisters somewey, then,' he said.

'No, Nathan; I'm connected with law.'

'Oh, imphm!'

'I'm astonished that Betty never told you I was a lawyer, Nathan.'

'Mebbe she wadna like, man. Betty's very discreet.' Then he added by way of sympathetic encouragement, 'Dinna think ocht aboot it; there maun be fouk for a' kinds o' jobs, ye ken, Maister Weelum.'

Nathan is capable of unconsciously starting many different emotions. I was touched by his kindness and unselfishness, and amused at his reflection on my profession. But I couldn't find words to thank him for the former, and I dared not laugh at his serious remarks on the latter. Then I bethought me of my plan to relieve him of his long, weary walks, and to find something to take up his attention nearer home. I asked him if he wouldn't give up his present work and take to the cultivation of tomatoes, and I outlined my little scheme as clearly as I could. Somehow, I didn't succeed in making it plain to him, for after I had finished, and when I asked him what he thought of it, all he said was, 'It has nae attraction for me, Maister Weelum, for I never could eat a tomato a' my life.'

'But, Nathan,' I said, 'you needn't eat them unless you like. You've to grow them, and then you sell them. There might be money in it for you, and for your goodness of heart in offering me all these envelopes I want to pay for the putting up of the glass-houses and stoves and piping; that will be a small return for all your kindness to me. You know all about the growing of tomatoes?'

'Ay, brawly.'

'And what do you think about it, then, Nathan?'

'What would Betty say, think ye?'

'I don't know,' I said, 'but we'll soon hear.'

Betty was baking soda-scones, and when she was free to leave her girdle she came in, and I told her all I had told Nathan. She looked from me to Nathan, and then, answering a sign, she went up and leaned over his bedside. I heard a throttled sob and a whispered word or two. Thinking they wished to talk it over by themselves, I slipped into the kitchen.

In a minute Betty was with me. 'Maister Weelum,' she said, and her lip trembled, 'Nathan, puir falla, broke doon there. He didna want you to see. He says he's obleeged to ye, but—but—but—it's no' worth while.'

I laid my hand on her shoulder in silent sympathy. Without a word she turned to her

bakeboard, and I went into my room and quietly closed the door.

. . . . . .

Last night, just after I had lit the gas and settled myself down for an hour's perusal of M'Crie's *Vindication*, Betty opened my door and came quietly in. 'Maister Weelum,' she said with a trembling lip, 'Nathan's a wee mair relieved. Him an' me ha'e had a closer he'rt-to-he'rt crack than ever we had in a' oor lives. I'm gled, in a wey; but—but I canna help thinkin' it'll be oor last.' She wiped her cheek with her apron. 'Hoots! hoots!' she said as the tears continued to flow; 'it's—it's no' like me to be a' begrutten like this; I'm gettin' awfu' soft-he'rted; but, oh, Maister Weelum, I'm awfu', awfu' sair-he'rted!'

I was at her side in a moment. 'There noo,' she said, 'I've dune;' and she choked down a sob. 'What I wanted to tell ye was that Nathan's very anxious to see ye; he wants to speak to ye aboot something. It's the first time he's speirt for onybody, an' I'm gled it's you. I ha'ena to gang in wi' ye, for he wants to see ye your lane.'

I pulled in my big chair nearer to the fire, put my mother's kirk hassock in front of it, and after I had seated Betty comfortably I went ben to Nathan's back-room.

A week or two ago, at his request, we had turned the bed round so that from where he lay he could see into the garden. I was present when Joe and Deacon Webster made the alteration; and when Nathan and I were alone and he had looked his 'e'efill' on the scene of his lifelong labour of love, he said, 'I'll no' weary noo, Maister Weelum. The flo'ers and the yirth ha'e aye a hamely look to me.'

And to-night, when I approached his bed, his eyes were fixed on the darkened shadowy plots outside. I didn't speak for a minute, and neither did he. Then, thinking he was unaware of my presence, I said, 'Nathan, I am here, beside you.'

'Ay, I ken.'

'Shall I bring in your lamp? It's getting dark now.'

'No, no, if ye please, dinna licht the lamp. I want to see—to see oot as lang as I can.'

I sat down beside him, and together we watched in silence the shadow of the night's wing creeping around bush and tree. And when everything was shrouded, and nothing was visible through the blue-black window-panes, Nathan's head turned on the pillow toward me. 'Man, Maister Weelum,' he said, 'it's quiet, quiet wark that. I'll never see it

again—no, never again. Ye dinna mind sittin' in the dark?'

'No, Nathan.'

'Ay, the licht hurts my een; an'—an' I've never said muckle a' my life, but I've often thocht oot lang screeds in the darkness, an' mebbe it'll help me oot wi' what I've to say to ye the noo. Ay, the Hebrons dinna speak muckle, Maister Weelum; but this is a forby time wi' me, an' I've something to ask o' ye. I hardly expec'it the ca' at this time o' the year. The back-en's the time o' liftin'. I aye thocht, somewey, that when my time cam' it wad be when the growth was a' by, the aipples pu'd, and the tatties pitted; and it seems awfu' queer that I should ha'e to gang when the buds are burstin', an'—an' the gairden delvin' on—imphm!—but it's His wull. "The young may, the auld must."—Imphm!—Ay, are ye listenin', Maister Weelum?'

I rose from my chair, and I stroked the gray hair back from his forehead. 'Yes, Nathan, I'm listening; but you must not give up hope; you're really not an old man, and'——

'No' an auld man! Imphm! I've—I've been an auld man a' my days. I canna mind o' ever bein' young. I was ten—only ten—when my faither was ta'en awa', an' I had to mak' the handle o' his spade fit my wee bit

haun. Ay, I had to, for the weans had to be brocht up, an'—an', thank God, I managed it! But it killed the youth that was in me. Ay, an', as I was gaun to say, I'm seein' things differently lyin' here. Coontin' the times ye've been at the kirk'll no' quieten your fears. Thinkin' o' the guid ye've dune or tried to do micht, an' my crap o' that's a very sma' yin. Still, I maun ha'e pleased the Almichty in some wey, or He wadna ha'e been sae kind to me; He wadna ha'e gi'en me Betty. Oh, man, Maister Weelum, I wish I could tell ye a' that Betty's been to me! I'm vexed I canna. I'm a Hebron, an' I needna try; but ye ken yoursel' in a sma' wey. She nursed ye —ay, an'—an' noo this is what I want to ask ye—when I'm away, Maister Weelum, will ye see that my—that Betty's a' richt—eh? Is that askin' an awfu' lot?'

'Oh, Nathan,' I said, and I knelt down at his bedside and took his softened hand in mine, 'Betty is to me a sacred trust, and if it be God's will that you must leave her, I will be with her till she goes out to meet you again.'

He pressed my hand. 'Thank ye, Maister Weelum. I—I thocht ye would; but I juist wanted to mak' sure. That's a', I think—a' at least as far as this world's concerned. There's a lot—an awfu' lot I should do, but I

canna. I doot I've been careless. I've left the want to come at the wab's en', an' I ha'e nae time to mak' it guid noo. I maun juist leave it to Him. Guid-nicht, Maister Weelum, an' ye 'll tell her—ye ken whae I mean—that I was gled a Hebron was o' service to her. Guid-nicht. God bless ye, man! Guid-bye.'

. . . . . .

'Guid-nicht—God bless ye!—Guid-bye.' These words kept ringing in my ears as I sat by my fire, and during the quiet hours my sorrowing thoughts strayed again and again into that wee back-room where Betty sat watching, and where Nathan lay dying.

Long after the village folks had gone to bed I heard the street door open quietly, and the doctor's shuffling footsteps in the lobby. He went through the kitchen into Nathan's room; then he came in and sat down in the big chair opposite me. 'I told Betty I would be here if I were needed, William,' he said, and he took out his old clay pipe and smoked in silence.

Just when the night was on the turn he opened the door and went quietly across to his patient. I followed him into the kitchen, and there, by a cheerless fire, sat Mrs Jardine in Betty's chair, and, poor, hard-working soul, she was asleep, with her head resting on Tom's encircling arm. I put my hand on his shoulder

and thanked him for his presence. Then I went back into my room, and, sitting down in my chair, closed my eyes, for their lids felt heavy and weary.

. . . . . .

'William, Betty wants you.' The voice seemed far away. I rose hurriedly and rubbed my eyes. The sparrows were twittering in the lime-tree, and the gray light of a March morning was lying cold in the room. The doctor was standing with his hand on the handle of the half-open door. 'Betty wants you, William,' he said in a whisper; and I passed him without a word, and with a heavy, apprehensive heart.

On the little round table was an open Bible which I knew well, and a pair of spectacles lay across the flattened-out leaves. Betty was standing at the bedside, her dimmed eyes fixed on Nathan's long, wan face. She didn't turn her head when I came in, but she held out her hand to me, and together we watched. Suddenly he raised his head from the pillow and his sunken, sightless eyes turned toward the window. 'Ay, imphm!—weel, Betty lass, it's aboot time I was daunerin'. It—it's a nice mornin' for the road; the birds 'll be whusslin' bonny in the Gillfit wood, an'—an' the sunshine will be on the hawthorn. No,

I'll no' mak' a noise. I'll open the door canny, and I'll no' wauken Maister Weelum. I'll—I'll juist slip oot quietly. Ay'——

And Betty and I watched Nathan slipping out quietly—oh, how quietly!—into the sunshine of God's own everlasting morning.

CHAPTER XX

pictures, indifferently packed and tied round with rope-line, were placed against the hat-rack. One, from the corner of the frame which was uncovered, I knew to be the oil-painting of my father and mother; and the other, from the new brilliancy of the gold, I recognised as Désirée's painting of Nith Bridge. Nathan's old hazel walking-stick, which daily he carried to his work, was lying along the top of the carpet-bag, tied securely to the leather handles.

'Désirée, my dear,' I said, with a happy flutter in my heart, 'I do believe Betty 's come back.'

She looked at me with a wondering smile on her face, as much as to say, 'Too good to be true;' and, acting on a common impulse, we rushed upstairs like expectant bairns.

There, in the little room facing southward, which we already called Betty's room, on a low chair before an empty fireplace, sat the dear old soul with her chin on her breast and fast asleep. Her bonnet-strings were loosened and lay over her shoulder, and her hands were tucked underneath a Paisley shawl, which was folded across her knees.

We tiptoed in and stood quietly beside her, Désirée on her right and I on her left. Slowly she opened two wondering eyes, and with a

bewildered gaze she looked around her. It was Désirée's hand she grasped. 'Oh, weans,' she said, 'I'm awfu' sorry to bother ye; but I'm back! I juist couldna stey away, an' ye maunna be angry wi' me for'——

My wife had knelt down beside her. Betty's face nestled into her cheek, and the rest of the sentence was lost to me in smothered sobbing. And I waited beside them in silence till the solace from one kindly heart had crept into the other. Then I left them, and quietly closed the door.

Betty, my own Betty Grier, as long, long ago you prepared a place for me within your big, warm, loving heart, so have you sanctified to yourself a place in mine; as you sheltered and cared for me in my spring of life, so will I shelter and care for you when your winter comes, when the cold wind tirls the leaf and it falls.

THE END.

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